やはり俺の青春ラブコメはまちがっている。

My youth romantic comedy is wrong as I expected.

渡 航【wataru watari】
illustration ぽんかん⑧

7.5
seven and a half

GAGAGA

Contents

S.S.1 Short Story①
やはり比企谷八幡のおふくろの味はまちがっている。012

S.A. SIDE-A＊Special Act.A
こちらとしても彼ら彼女らの行く末に
幸多からんことを願わざるを得ない。018

S.S.2 Short Story②
もちろん、比企谷八幡の優しさは捻くれている。082

B.T. ぼーなすとらっく！ 比企谷小町の計略088

S.S.3 Short Story③
思いのほか、比企谷八幡の勉強方法は
まちがっていない。142

S.A. SIDE-B＊Special Act.B
未だ、彼らは帰るべき場所を知らない。148

S.S.4 Short Story④
それでも比企谷八幡のポジティブシンキングは
歪みきっている。254

平塚 静
shizuka hiratsuka
S.A.
SIDE-A
My youth romantic comedy is
wrong as I expected.

S.S. 1
S.S. 2
S.S. 3
S.S. 4
千葉県横断◆お悩み相談メール
雪ノ下雪乃
yukino yukinoshita
比企谷八幡
hachiman hikigaya

Yui's Diary

Sable

YUI

6月 June

7月 July

8月 August

9月 September

10月 October

11月 November

3 期末テスト開始!

8 ヒッキー誕生日

10 体育祭!!!!!!!

12 修学旅行! 京都!!(15日まで)

1 奉仕部キャンプ (3日まで)

11 家族旅行 (13日まで)

13 イベント\(^ー^)/

14 姫菜誕生日

17 花火大会!

18 誕生日

20 夏休み!!!!!!!!!!

14 文化祭

15

21 メール 返すこと!

27 やきのんち ★お泊り★

S.A.B 未だ、彼らは帰るべき場所を知らない。 148

B.T. 比企谷小町の計略 088

S.S.1 やはり比企谷八幡のおふくろの味はまちがっている。 012

S.S.2 もちろん、比企谷八幡の優しさは捻くれている。 082

S.S.3 思いのほか、比企谷八幡の勉強方法はまちがっていない。 142

S.S.4 それでも比企谷八幡のポジティブシンキングは歪みきっている。 254

S.A.A こちらとしても彼ら彼女らの行く末に幸多からんことを願わざるを得ない。 018

Love Sable

2 F

Short Story 1

Hikigaya Hachiman's taste of home cooking is wrong as expected.

It was the peak of the fall reading season. Typically, this would be the season to be indulging in books, but today just wouldn't let that come to pass as we stared at the computer that Hiratsuka-sensei forced onto.

"Chiba Prefecture Problem Consultation Mails…"

When I apathetically announced the title, Yuigahama clapped her hands repeatedly.

Yukinoshita stopped her hands that flipped the pages of her paperback book and gave me a puzzled look.

"…Hey, where did this get sent from?"

"Well, Hiratsuka-sensei probably had something to do with it…"

Recently, Hiratsuka-sensei suddenly added problem consultation mails to the activities of the Service Club. Apparently, they were mails from various people in school with issues.

Yuigahama looked at the computer and read aloud.

"Errm, today's first correspondence is… A correspondence from a resident of Chiba, Pen Name: Master Swordsman Shogun-san."

This guy's pen name didn't mean anything, did it…? Just now, not only did a real name come to mind, but so did a face and figure.

[I have chuunibyou, but I want to love][1]
[Even if you're suffering from chuunibyou, you can still love. Why don't you muster up your courage and try confessing? The other party should reply with this: "I'm sorry."]

"……He's getting turned down already!?"

Yuigahama who was reading the answer noticed a little late. Unrequited love and a broken love were splendid loves too, you know?

But, well, just like this, only bothersome, worthless problems would come in. Also, even though it said Chiba Prefecture, only mails from Chiba came in.

In any case, one case was dealt with, so on to the next mail. I sent Yuigahama a look to go on.

"Ah, okay, I'll read the next one. Umm… This is from Pen Name: Currently looking for a spouse, I have stable income (teacher)-san."

Hey, again, was there any point in having a pen name? Not to mention the appeal here was really outrageous. How serious was this person, like really? Then again, I mostly understood what this problem entailed from just the pen name alone.

[As embarrassing as it is, I'm not particularly well-versed in housework and that, of course, includes cooking. I can't help but worry when I'm married in the future (lol). In the first place, I'm worried about whether I can get married (lol), but I'm thinking that I do want to try to remember at least one special dish that I can cook. Something popular with men (lol), also something light so it's popular with men, ah, I wrote that twice, didn't I (lol)? Anyway, is there anything simple that will leave a good impression with men?]

"This isn't something you ask students, is it…?"

Creepy. This person's too serious that it's creepy. Also, the overuse of the self-inflicting (lol)'s were really freaking scary, so it's really creepy. But my fear wasn't at all shared with the other two as they nonchalantly talked.

"Ah, maybe meat and potato stew? Or something made at home?"

"If it's Japanese-styled hamburger, then just a little change to it would leave a different impression, wouldn't it?"

Well, what those two were saying were well-grounded. But it's exactly because it's well-grounded that there's a downfall to it.

"Well, wait. It's a minus if you end up aiming too high since conversely, it'll make you look creepy instead."

Women who made those tend to think "as long I made this, then I'll have it in the bag (lol), guys are too easy (lol)" and I wasn't too fond of that. Whoa, stereotyping.

"Then what would be good?"

"I-I might want to know too, a little bit."

Yukinoshita shot a look at me while Yuigahama looked at me nervously.

"It looks to me you guys don't know the true meaning behind the "taste of home cooking". Listen here. The thing about moms are that the way they handle their sons and daughters are completely different. And the taste of home cooking to men of the world is basically…"

I stopped abruptly and Yuigahama bended forward. Uh, I didn't say anything amazing…

"Just some adequately baked meat and white rice. This is the taste of home cooking."

"…I feel silly for listening to you seriously."

"And here I was thinking what you'd come up with…"

Both of them were completely astounded. If I were to write astounded as “AKIRE”[2], then that would give off vibes of a masterpiece.

But, well, I had an excuse to go with that.

“Anyway, the point is that a guy’s stomach is very simple. Also, once it reaches marriage, then cooking is something you do every day, you know?”

When I spoke, Yukinoshita placed her hand on her chin and took a pondering posture.

“That’s true. If it’s something everyday, then we’ll have to think of a lineup of dishes that the person won’t get tired of…”

“No, anything complicated is just a pain. The easier, the better.”

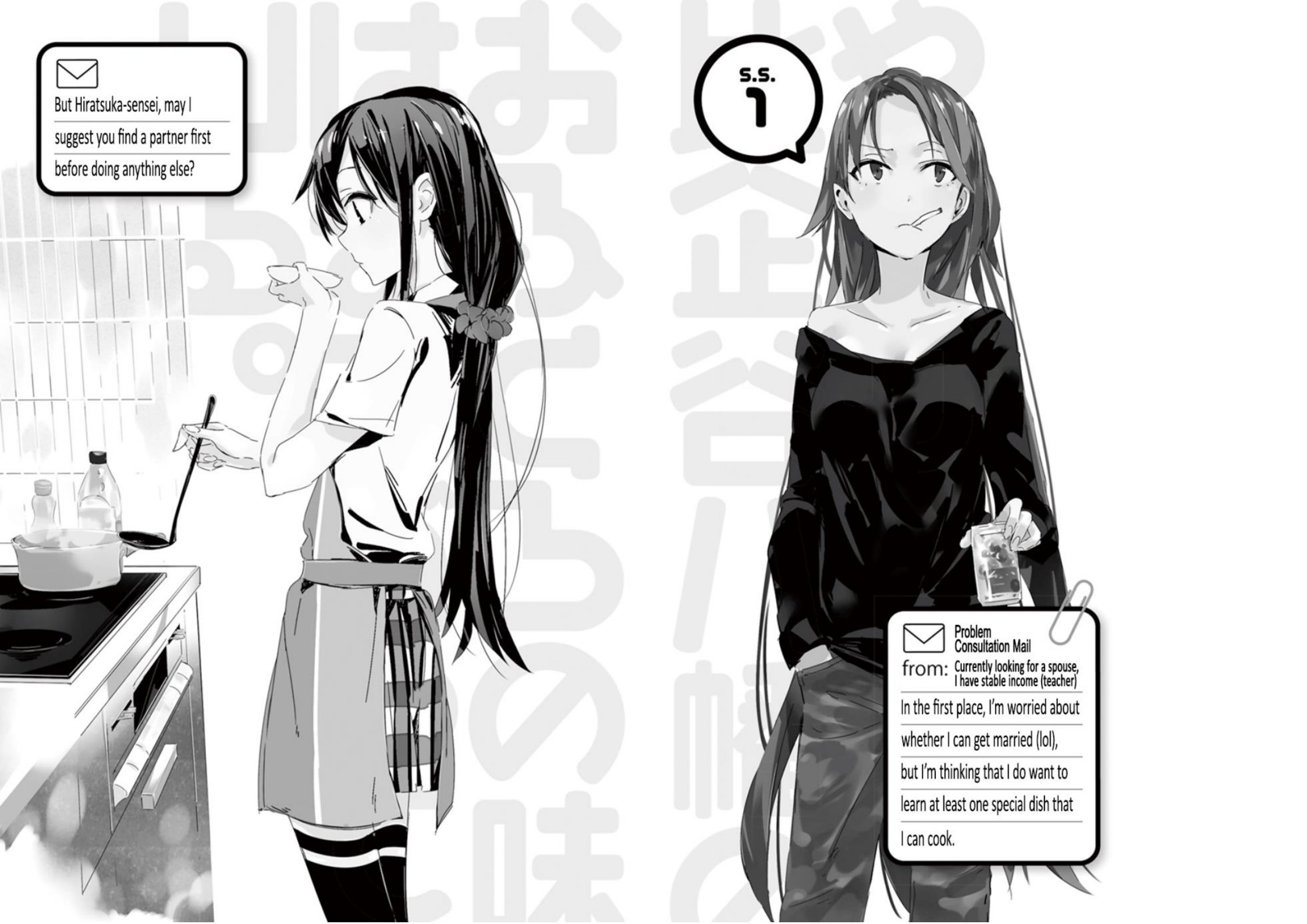
“You’re looking at this from a house-husband point of view…!? Not to mention your thinking is too realistic.”

“…Well, I’ll just keep it in mind as a reference. How would this be for an answer?”

[Meat and potato stew and Japanese-styled hamburger are the primary choices, but a dish that can remind men of their mother’s cooking would be ginger-fried pork. But Hiratsuka-sensei, may I suggest you find a partner first before doing anything else?]

…There really was no point to the pen names.

Someone take her already. Please.


But Hiratsuka-sensei, may I suggest you find a partner first before doing anything else?
S.S. 1
Problem Consultation Mail
from: Currently looking for a spouse, I have stable income (teacher)
In the first place, I'm worried about whether I can get married (lol), but I'm thinking that I do want to learn at least one special dish that I can cook.

SIDE-A * Special Act.A

Even we have to pray that the future those **boys and girls**head for is full of happiness.

Marriage. It's the graveyard of life.

Those who were married, without exception, proudly sang its praises.

Being happy from having someone there to say "oh, I'm back" or being able to try your best the following day as well from just seeing your child's sleeping face…

But hold your horses.

You could already say "I'm back" at your parents' house. If not that, then you could just say "I'm back" to the cover of your mouthwash instead. And if you're seeing your child's sleeping face, then that meant you were working in overtime hell.

Was that really something you could call happiness?

The eyes of those who supposedly advocated that happiness rotted in the same way as mine did, as if they were like zombies who dragged people into the marshlands with them.

I ask again. Now then, was that really something you could call happiness?

Happiness was, you know, something like, how should I say it? It's something along the lines of this: Maybe it's something like the feeling of watching your little sister in an apron preparing breakfast while humming a tune first thing in the morning?

With that scenery unfolding right before my eyes, I let out a yawn and waited absentmindedly for my beloved little sister to finish making breakfast.

And this was what you could call happiness. We don't need something like marriage, yeah!

My two working parents left the house early today as well. They sure were busy. Really, they truly were going through quite a lot of trouble. It's thanks to them that I could lead this rather fulfilling lifestyle.

Eventually, my plan was to take up the occupation as a full-time house husband, but with late marriages becoming more rampant and marriage rates dropping, that may not be so simple. There was also something about divorce rates on the rise too.

Perhaps, the lifestyle that I was aiming for may not be welcomed given the current state of society. Then again, since the dawn of history, was there ever a time the lifestyle I desired actually suitable? Like maybe during the Heian era?

Accounting for the likelihood that I couldn't get married, I would like it if my parents could work energetically forever. It was of my opinion that they work themselves hard, from not only their legs but also their very core, to keep me afloat.

With the ambitions and the like of Hikigaya Hachiman's burning at my chest, Komachi spun and did a turn in the kitchen in front of me. Apparently, she was done making breakfast.

Komachi hurriedly carried the morning plates from the kitchen.

"Sorry for the wait~!"

"Right on."

She placed the tray on the table and Komachi sat in the seat directly opposite from me. Today's menu consisted of toast, salad, omelet… and coffee, huh? A rather American dish if I say so myself. Or maybe even Nagoya. It looks sooo[1] good, yup.

Komachi started doing house chores around the time she was in elementary school, but recently, she had gotten so used to it especially with her cooking skills already far surpassing mine that she was already knocking on the door to a mother's domain.

From the viewpoint of my parents, they were probably deeply moved from seeing their child going beyond them. I, too, felt I would be surpassing my father as a scum in the near future as well.

"Sorry for the trouble."

"Onii-chan, you promised not to say that anymore, right?"

After a brief, super random conversation peculiar to siblings, we expressed our gratitude for the blessing of life and clapped our hands together. Expressing your gratitude to livestock was important. I learned that in "Silver Spoon". Also, corporate slaves should receive the Kansha Kangeki Ame Arashi[2] too. We could eat today as well because Papan and Maman were working. Eating food without having to work was delicious. Super delicious.

But as delicious as it was, unfortunately, one of my hated foodstuffs jumped into my field of vision.

"Ah, I totally hate tomatoes, though?"

No matter how good the free food was, this was something I could never say was tasty. Komachi didn't act particularly concerned even after I said that as I fiddled with the tomatoes with my fork.

"Yup, that's why I put them in."

Komachi added without a hint of shyness and began to eat her salad… Eh? Why did it turn out like that? Wasn't that kind of weird?

Were you not taught by our parents to not do things people didn't like…? Speaking of which, I wasn't taught that myself. As you'd expect from my parents. It's the style that emphasized "watch and remember". What's up with that professionalism training for newcomers?

This was where I should make it clear to my little sister what the problem was as her older brother.

"No, see here… Komachi-chan?"

"Onii-chan has a lot of things he likes and hates after all. Whether it's people or food."

Komachi carried the omelet to her mouth and answered.

Hoh, if you're going to say something like that, then I had something to say too. It's time that I taught you, the truth of this world. I grabbed my coffee cup, took a sip, and puffed up with pride

"It's not like that's a bad thing. If you just force yourself with something you don't like, everyone involved will just end up miserable."

"Haa… I can't see onii-chan ever getting married."

Komachi sighed with an indication of "gosh, so silly". What's up with your attitude, huh? It's not like I said anything wrong, right? If anything, I was fully aware of how impossible it was for me to get married, so could you not bring it up? Because in order to avoid that, onii-chan right now was repeating every day about being a full-time house husband in his mind so it could be imprinted into his subconscious.

In the first place, I was the kind of man who didn't want to marry by becoming something I wasn't.

Deceiving your natural self wasn't something you should be doing as people just had different sense of values.

Depending on how you were brought up, you couldn't deny your preferences either. If marriage was where you didn't accept those differences and forced yourself to be together with someone else, then it wasn't necessarily the case that it'd bring you happiness.

As thoughts came right after the other, I would eat my omelet. Yep, it was delicious.

"There's ketchup there."

Well, duh, if it's an omelet, then there had to be ketchup on it. Or was it something else? Could it be you were a mayo person? A mayo looooover? Or maybe Shinoraaaa[3]? This girl sure was Ultra Relaxed[4], huh?

As I thought about how nostalgic it was for Komachi to not know something normally, I lifted my head and immediately in front of me was Komachi's face.

After Komachi stared at my face, she leaned forward and gently touched my cheeks with the tip of her fingers.

What…? Or so I thought, but apparently there was ketchup on my face. Just say it in the first place. Your face was too close, so annoying, and embarrassing. That newly-wed behavior was making me embarrassed, stop it. I sent an objecting stare to Komachi, but she wasn't bothered and grinned.

"That just now was high in Komachi points."

"If you didn't add that, maybe."

I replied back and I gulped my salad.

She really wasn't a cute little sister at all… If she didn't follow up with little things like that, she'd be super cute too. I couldn't help, but make a bitter smile. But because of that bitter smile, even the tomatoes started to taste bitter too…

Well, just like how I was aware of Komachi's good and bad points, Komachi understood me. Family was quite convenient, I'd say.

With all that's been said, this was basically that. Even if you didn't marry, if you had a little sister, wasn't that good enough? If manufactures were going to bother putting disks in a package with the actual item, then they should just include little sisters instead. They'd definitely fly off the shelves.

× × ×

I spent the typical morning away, led my usual school life, and eventually greeted the usual business after school time.

What was different than ordinary was that a somewhat different type of request was brought to us.

The bearer of the request was Hiratsuka-sensei who had placed something on the table.

Yukinoshita and Yuigahama looked at each other and then glanced at the magazine and pamphlet in turn. Yukinoshita was squinting and making a difficult face, but Yuigahama was seemingly thinking about nothing at all with a look of wonder.

Whatever it was, since it looked related to a request, I took a quick peek from behind wondering what in the world it could be.

On the magazine Yuigahama was looking at absentmindedly were familiar looking landscapes and words printed. Not to mention it was labeled as "Chiba". It was apparently one of those so called local magazines. Eh, what's that about, did they have special Chiba information written in here? How should I go about asking for a subscription to this, I wonder?

On the other hand, the printout that Yukinoshita was reading had the word "Project" written on the header. It was probably a project plan of the sort.

"Ummm… 'Love Marriage Chiba Wedding'."

Yuigahama read aloud with a deeply interested voice. What was with that angel of love legend naming sense…? It was getting dreadful because I was getting assaulted with some kind of dreamin' feeling so I took a look at the portion that Yuigahama was reading.

What leaped into my vision was romantic content enveloped in absurd happiness. I reflexively winced at it. No way, I was definitely sure marriage wasn't representative of all these positive images at all…

"Haa, 'Youth Marriage Special Edition', huh…"

I let out a voice slightly mixed with disgust.

But it looked like Hiratsuka-sensei wasn't holding any particular negative images regarding it. When she raised her index finger, she explained it thoroughly.

"That's right. As part of revitalizing the Chiba region, it seems like they plan on starting up a local magazine. They plan on making the magazine through a joint cooperation with the administration, neighboring bridal companies, and hotels with marriage halls and so forth in order to have the younger generation have a deeper understanding of marriage."

Fumu. This was apparently a project that saw the occasional involvement of both the people and the government by means of a local magazine. And so the magazine brought here was a sample.

While listening to Hiratsuka-sensei's explanation, Yukinoshita was tracing along the lines of the sentences on the project plan with her eyes. After she placed her hands on her temple, she set the papers on the table and tapped.

"…So, why was this problem brought to us?"

After taking an ample pause, Yukinoshita sent a fixed stare to Hiratsuka-sensei. Hiratsuka-sensei choked on her words and averted her gaze in a seemingly ashamed fashion.

"W-Well, that's, you see… The higher ups at school wanted to cooperate in some form or another, so I ended up being entrusted with the task so…"

With Yukinoshita sharply glaring her down, Hiratsuka-sensei answered incoherently.

"Why our school, then again, why us…?"

When I grumbled with a sigh, Hiratsuka-sensei blinked her eye and then suddenly had distant eyes.

"A reason, huh? Well… One mustn't seek out the reason for orders that were passed down from the top. That's what it means to work."

“I didn’t want to hear that, I really didn’t want to hear that…”

The small remaining desire to work just instantly disappeared… How mysterious… When you lose the urge to work, the desire to marry (= desire to be dependent) steadily increased instead… It had to be that, if everyone started thinking that they wanted to be supported, the marriage rates would shoot up.

As I welcomed the battleship of dependence at the port in my mind, Yukinoshita lightly cleared her throat.

“The problem is why it’s us in particular that should be doing this.”

“Ah, that’s right. Isn’t this, like, Hiratsuka-sensei’s job…?”

Yuigahama who was engrossed in the local magazine up until now lifted her head from Yukinoshita’s words and she looked Hiratsuka-sensei curiously.

Due to how pure her look was, Hiratsuka-sensei who was being stared at cringed and faltered. She then slipped out an “uuu” with a crying and shaking voice.

“I-I mean… I-I don’t have a clue what to do when it comes to marriage so…”

She finally broke down into tears.

…Aaah ah, they made her cry.

When I looked at Yuigahama, she then looked at Yukinoshita.

“Yukinon…”

No, you’re at fault too, you know… With Hiratsuka-sensei weeping in front of her and with a helpless stare from Yuigahama, Yukinoshita flinched and let out a sigh of resignation.

“Haa… It’s not like we’re experts at the matter ourselves, but we’ll help as well.”

“…Okay, thank you.”

As she wiped her tears and sniffed, Hiratsuka-sensei adorably expressed her gratitude. It was an unexpected cuteness that was unsuitable for her age.

Hurry! Someone hurry up and take her! Otherwise, I’ll be the one to instead!

× × ×

We poured tea for Hiratsuka-sensei to calm her down and we began looking at the project plan.

So to summarize the entire story, we were given a page in the local magazine and apparently we needed to fill it with a written article.

“But what to do, huh?”

Yuigahama went “hmm” and crossed her arms.

Certainly, being told to make an article out of the blue was quite the pickle. Hiratsuka-sensei probably didn't know what to do hence why she brought it to our attention.

But since the framework was seemingly already decided, we couldn't really just do it without this plan. In that case, what we could do was limited.

"For now, we could just write something and fill it up with that. Aah, we could make this page a space for an advertisement and sell it off somewhere. That way, there'd be no work and we'll even get our hands on some money."

"Hikigaya… That's no good."

When I said that, Hiratsuka-sensei shook her head with a dejected expression. That's a no go, huh…? I thought it was a pretty good idea too. It's a style where you sold the framework through underhanded means and reaped the profits.

"The problem is the deadline… Just how much time do we have?"

Yukinoshita placed her cup on the table with a clack and moved her eyes to the calendar. Following her, Hiratsuka-sensei adjusted her eyes as well.

"It hits the press next week, so for the most part, there's about a week left for proofreading."

"That's very sudden, isn't it?"

Yukinoshita sent a fixed, faulting stare to Hiratsuka-sensei, but Hiratsuka-sensei smiled bitterly with an exhausted face.

"Work just tends to fall to the side, see… Even more so with work that's hard to get started on."

"Aah, I totally kind of get that."

Yep, yep, same here. When you lost your motivation, things just gradually fell to the backburner. That's why it's better to get into gear and get things done as soon as time would permit and it'd be less taxing mentally. This world was abundant with those kinds of dirty jobs and the fact that there were people who got paid to do them really scared the daylights out of me. I definitely didn't want to do stuff like that. As expected, I believe there wasn't a need to work.

With that said, it's not like there was a commission or anything. Not to mention quality wasn't emphasized here either it seemed.

"How about writing up a random essay and using that?"

When I said that, Yukinoshita shook her head from side to side.

"If just that, it'd be rather difficult if the page was just full of words, no?"

"Then we can gloss it over with design then?"

If it was just littered with words, then the strength of design could make things work too. I mean, anime tended to do it, you know? Something along the lines of the fancy stuff like cool looking words and narration that occupied the space.

Although it did make you suspect that maybe the images weren't made in time, but let's just be positive and pass it off as production words with that kind of sense.

"If we had the time, then we might be able to work with that, but that seems difficult as well. Moreover, do you think an amateur's design could fill up the space?"

"Don't they have past templates? Just put a number of those together and fill in the space with text."

When I said that, Yukinoshita took a sullen thinking posture for just a moment and in that time, Yuigahama who was completely lost had a trembling expression and pulled at Hiratsuka-sensei's sleeve.

"Se-Sensei, these two are kind of scary…"

"That just makes them all the more reliable. Although they're not acting like high school students…"

Yukinoshita looked like she came to a conclusion despite Hiratsuka-sensei's bitter smile as she placed her hand on her temple and let out a sigh.

"Haa, you really are quite the savant when it comes to cutting corners…"

"I put an emphasis on efficiency, that's what."

"In any case, that's rejected. The order was for an article befitting of a high school student."

Well, what Yukinoshita said was quite right. In the first place, we wouldn't need to be involved if this was left in the hands of a professional.

But even so, something befitting of a high school student, huh…? Just exactly was this concept "befitting of a high school student" that the government office and the higher ups were thinking of? Was it the freshness of a high school baseball player? Or maybe that chippy feeling of "TODAY, NOW" high school girls?

I reflected on myself and then I took another look at Yukinoshita.

"Well, everything was no good at the start then. You and I aren't like high school students at all anyway."

"…That's right."

Having said that, Yukinoshita dropped her shoulders looking somewhat convinced and averted her eyes.

"Usually the first thing you start thinking about is what to do. Starting right off the bat from how to fill up the space… Just how twisted are you two?"

After looking at how we were, Hiratsuka-sensei extrapolated with both a surprising and admiring tone. Both of us were very well aware of that so we ended up letting out a sigh.

No, wait.

There's someone… Someone that was very like a high school student… A sudden realization hit me and I looked up.

"Yuigahama, it's time for you to make use of your normalcy."

"The way you put it kind of makes me mad!"

Yuigahama made a resentful scowl, but Yukinoshita continued with an earnest expression.

"Yuigahama-san, could we ask for your help?"

"Asking me with this kind of timing, how complicated!"

Despite finally given the chance to do some work, Yuigahama went "uuu" as she was tearing up. Well, you know, I think that normalcy of yours was quite valuable. At the very least, I think Yukinoshita personally thought that portion saved her quite a bit. Being normal was good enough for Yuigahama, really.

Yuigahama let out a reluctant "uu", but with Yukinoshita wordlessly looking at her, she stretched out her "uuu" groan even longer and looked like she had prepared herself.

Yuigahama crossed her arms.

Yuigahama held her head.

Yuigahama was dazing off absentmindedly.

Apparently her head exploded from excessive thinking. She went "bleh" with a face that looked like her soul was sucked out. But suddenly, she clapped her hands.

"Ah, how about we accept wedding design submissions or something!"

"There aren't very many people who can draw a rough draft of a wedding dress."

I had that kind of idea in mind too, but actually making it happen was difficult. Having to scour the area for someone who could design dresses would be a lot of trouble too. We weren't in the position to be checking with people one by one whether they would "wind" or "not wind"[5] either.

When I said that, Yuigahama rubbed her head back and forth in a circular fashion and suddenly leaned forward in exclamation.

"Ummmm, then how about a wedding dress contest! Or something like that?"

"Time-wise, a plan to solicit submissions from the entire school may be difficult as well."

Yukinoshita calmly shot down the idea. Given the schedule where submission was next week, whether we made it known to the entire student body or hosted an event, it really was unlikely. Even if we tried the schedule where we reduced the time for proofreading, the remaining week wouldn't change.

Sorry to say to Yuigahama who went through the trouble of thinking things, but you couldn't win against adult circumstances. Well, adult circumstances typically meant deadlines though. We should just abolish the system of deadlines already.

Yuigahama was still trying her best to think, but she then crossed her arms looking like she gave up.

"Um, marriage, marriage, marriage… Mmm, I guess I don't get it. It just doesn't feel real or something."

"Well, it's not something we should be thinking about at our age after all."

For the most part, I'd be legal to marry next year, but in regards to that, it didn't feel like reality at all. The two girls of course were in the same situation.

But a resounding, solemn tone could be heard.

"I guess so… When I was your age, I never gave it much thought too—"

Yuigahama and I went dead quiet and slid our eyes in a different direction.

"…"

"…"

Wait a second, what're you going to do about this heavy atmosphere? It's not the time to be looking out the window right now, Hiratsuka-sensei.

On the other hand, the only one quiet for an apparently different reason was Yukinoshita. She placed her hand on her chin in total contemplation.

"Thought about it…"

"Ahn?"

When I questioned Yukinoshita's words that she slipped out, she looked convinced of something and was nodding her head.

"On the contrary, it's exactly because we're not thinking about it that if we were to take a survey, then we may be able to get some material out of it."

"That makes sense~. It might be pretty fun if we get everyone to fill out a questionnaire or something too."

Yuigahama went "ooh~" and clapped her hands.

A survey and questionnaire, huh? As a design to fill the page, they were reasonable solutions. Like in graduation yearbooks, they'd have something like "the best 3 xx type of people". Huh? Could you stop entering people's names in worthless entries like "someone likely to become a CEO in the future" just so you could be considerate to those whose names weren't listed anywhere else? That kindness was actually painful instead. There was that, but what's with the blank pages at the end of my yearbook? Was I missing pages or something?

Even for this local magazine, couldn't we just settle for a completely white page, litter it with random phrases like "to the future ~to LOVE marriage~", and include a list of names on it? If we just filled this page with "it's you" and other things like that, it'd probably fool some people out there.

As I thought in my own way about things, Yukinoshita was thinking in a way like herself, but very seriously.

"It'll take quite a lot of time if we tried with the entire school or an entire grade, so it may be better to do it one with just one class…"

"That doesn't seem like a very useful sample size."

One class seriously made it on the level of graduation yearbooks. As a survey, it seemed rather far from being an effective statistic. It's not really something to worry about since it's not like we're measuring our academic capability. Of course, Yukinoshita understood that as well.

"Given the situation, we don't have a choice. So, once we compose the page, we can add a column of the sort and it should turn out fine from there."

After Yukinoshita said that, Hiratsuka-sensei who was watching us the entire time spoke up.

"Fumu, a column huh? Sounds like Hikigaya's time to shine."

"Why me…?"

There're two others here… Yuigahama's writing ability gave off the impression that it was something to be concerned about so it was out there. As for Yukinoshita, the things she'd write were pretty much going to be something out there as well. But that's not to say that didn't apply to me either because I was rather confident in what I'd write to be out there too, okay! Then again, this was originally sensei's job, no?

I put a good portion of my soul into the words "why me", but Hiratsuka-sensei stopped me and clarified with a clear reason.

"It's because you're always writing all those reports filled with nonsense. This kind of work should be a fool's errand for you."

You couldn't expect someone to do something after being told off like that… What, did I not have the qualities of a superior?

It might've been because I made a rather reluctant face that Hiratsuka-sensei looked at me with one eye closed after brushing her hair to the side.

"Putting aside the things you write, I'm actually praising you rather highly."

Stating it that way with that kind of smile made it difficult to refuse.

"…Um, I don't want to write it though."

Flushed with embarrassment, I averted my eyes and ahead was Yukinoshita who was pressing against her temple for some reason.

“Editing seems like it’ll be quite a lot of work…”

No, it’s not like I asked you… Then again, I’d rather you not do anything because you totally seem like you’d put a bunch of red marks all over the place. Let’s go in the direction of praising me more and extending things as the objective of editing!

Seeing Yukinoshita sigh, Hiratsuka-sensei wore a teasing smile.

“Oh? Yukinoshita, you’ll look it over yourself, huh? Then I’m not too worried.”

“…Well, I don’t mind if it’s just doing something like that.”

She flicked her face to the side in displeasure and straightened her collar. No, like I said, I didn’t ask you to… What? Were you the editor-in-chief or something?

“Okay, next is to think of the questionnaire, huh?”

Yuigahama adjusted her sitting and spoke. Well, since the objective was decided, then we had better get a move on. Hiratsuka-sensei turned back to us again.

“Now then, before we hand them out to everyone, let’s go for a test run.”

When we amassed papers from all over the room, all of us thought of various related questions. Yukinoshita collected them all and created an overview of the questions. She then gave it to Hiratsuka-sensei who made copies and we all wrote our answers to the questions.

Shortly after we finished writing, Hiratsuka-sensei looked around at us.

“Now then, just what do we have here, hm?”

After she said that, she quickly grabbed a piece of paper written with answers from the stack.

Q. How much do you expect your spouse to make yearly?
A. More than 10,000,000.

“Hikigaya-kun…”

“Hikki…”

When Yukinoshita and Yuigahama both looked at me with apathetic eyes, they recited my name with slightly withdrawing voices.

“Hold on a second. How’d you know it was me?”

“We can tell from just your handwriting…”

Yuigahama looked at me with sad eyes and Yukinoshita brushed away the hair that rested on her shoulder.

“Does this man really think he’s worth that much, I wonder? He has no friends, his science is despair, he has low prospects for a job, and his future is bleak. And on top of that, his eyes are like a dead fish’s…”[6]

“Shut up. There are plenty of dummies out there in the world who’d write the same thing.”

You see it all the time. Like on those evening variety news programs that held a special on those seeking marriage. The women above thirty who attended these marriage parties would write this kind of answer, right? In the first place, the people who actually fulfilled those conditions were popular, so they wouldn’t go to those marriage parties, damn it. It was probably more correct to say they weren’t looking at reality at all than it was to say they were watching dreams too much.

“W-Well, that is, what can you say? It’s good to aim high, yep.”

Hiratsuka-sensei took my side which was rare. Thank you, sensei! So what exactly did she write on that piece of paper that she was hiding behind her back, hm?

“I-In any case! We have our questions, so let’s start getting some samples!”

As if noticing my rotten stare, Hiratsuka-sensei energetically jumped out of her seat.

× × ×

Yuigahama volunteered to get the samples for us, so we waited for her absentmindedly in the meantime. Hiratsuka-sensei was reflecting on herself while grumbling something as she fixed the answers she put on the questionnaire.

As for Yukinoshita, she was reading her book like always. She suddenly twitched her shoulders and she closed her book.

After that, the door energetically flung open.

“There were still some people hanging around so I got them to fill out the questionnaires!”

Yuigahama came in the room, with the stack of papers proudly raised in the air. What’s this? Was this Yukinoshita’s special ability or something? She’s like our cat whenever Komachi came home…

“Thank you, I’m sorry for leaving the rest to you, Yuigahama-san.”

When Yukinoshita spoke to her, Yuigahama answered as she took her designated seat.

“No, no, it’s fine with me. It looked like only the guys from our classes were hanging around anyway.”

From what Yuigahama said, it looked like there weren’t many papers filled out amongst the stack of papers she scattered about. Still, this amount was something that only Yuigahama could achieve.

“Well, even if I went around asking, no one would answer me.”

“I suppose so. If it was Hikigaya-kun, it’s likely you’d be seen as a lawless religious solicitor.”

“That’s right. I have way too much nonconformist charisma that it’s dangerous.”

I retorted since she was poking fun at me and Yukinoshita let out an astounded sigh. The echo of that sigh continued.

“In your case, it’s scary since I can imagine you as the founder of a religious sect…”

Hiratsuka-sensei uttered with a somber face. Wait, what’s with that serious look…? I mean, if Yukinoshita went around herself, I was pretty sure people would gently refuse her because they’d be too wary of her.

Even I wanted to let out a sigh, but that was when Yuigahama went “now, now”, mediating the situation.

“Anyway, why don’t we take a look?”

After urging us, we scattered the papers and began to inspect them. Yuigahama read aloud from one piece of paper from the stack.

Q. What career do you want your spouse to have?
A. I want to marry a voice actor!

It took me less than a moment to figure out who wrote that.

“Okay, yeah, next, next. Then again, this guy isn’t even in our class…”

I instantly rejected Zaimokuza’s answer sheet and we continued to look through the next questionnaires one by one.

Q. Is there anything you may be concerned about regarding marriage?
A. I totally can’t cook. Also, cleaning. Can’t do it
A. My relationship with my mother-in-law, living together and separately, and my inheritance. It’s because I have a lot of siblings
A. I’m worried about Hayama x Hachiman’s future

As we assessed the answers read aloud, I went “bleh”, feeling a little annoyed. Especially with that last one. Written anonymously or not, you could tell in a heartbeat who wrote what… We FINISH with NO HINT.[7]

“Easy to guess who wrote what…”

“Well, it’s people from our class after all.”

True enough, it’s just like Yuigahama said. All of them were undoubtedly answers coming from people in our class. It was probably Miura, Kawasomething-san, and Ebina-san…

For Miura, she was, like, consistent with how she normally was that I couldn’t think negatively of her. As you’d expect from the Queen.

As for Kawasomething-san… Seems rough for her, huh… She was giving off vibes like Sachi Usuko-san[8] so I really wanted her to try her best to grab ahold of happiness.

Ebina-san was more or less out of the question.

“What do you think of putting these out for display?”

Yukinoshita tilted her head with a pensive look. No, you didn’t need to think twice about it, these were no good… It looked like I wasn’t the only one with those thoughts as Hiratsuka-sensei turned the papers over and groaned.

“As I thought, these answers aren’t very realistic.”

“Is that something you should be saying…?”

I reflexively shot a fixed stare at Hiratsuka-sensei. In disregard of me, Yuigahama crossed her arms and thought.

“But it’s hard to answer since we don’t know what’s good and bad about marriage life. And since there’s no one here with experience, there’re a lot of things we don’t get too…”

Well, the only samples we had were our parents and it’s not like we’re actually conscious of the fact. It might even end up different if you tried to watch them with a new perspective, but trying to become someone and think like them was extremely difficult. It’s particularly even more so with those in the middle of puberty whose self-awareness inflated to ridiculous levels.

No matter what you did, you couldn’t become someone else.

Even our parents felt the same way. In reality, having to marry and live together with someone else was probably far more difficult than we could imagine, no doubt.

As I slipped into deep thought, Yukinoshita spoke up as if something came to mind.

“I believe I have someone in mind if it’s someone young with simulated experience on the matter.”

“Eh? Really?”

When Yuigahama asked attentively, Yukinoshita showed a smile.

“Yes. When it comes to knowing the pains of taking care of a useless bum in close proximity, then I believe she would be the most qualified.”

Yukinoshita answered in a very detailed manner. Hearing that, my eyes ended up sparkling in turn.

Eh, you knew someone like that? Really, seriously? Someone like that would totally support me for life. Hurry up and introduce her to me. With this, I was pretty much winning at life.

…Or so I thought.

× × ×

After that, not an hour had passed and the person Yukinoshita had in mind had arrived. It was a face that I recognized all too well. In fact, from this morning even.

“So, why Komachi?”

My eyes spontaneously turned rotten, starkly different from the shining glitter in my eyes earlier. In contrast, Komachi wore a grinning smile on her face as she was standing at the front of the door.

“Didn’t you hear me? That there was someone going through the pains of taking care of useless weight.”

Could it be? No, there wasn’t a need to hypothesize because that “useless weight” was probably referring to me… Well, since she didn’t say useless person, then this was a rather mild phrasing coming from Yukinoshita. Maybe she’s in a good mood today, hm?

Once Yukinoshita gave an outline of the situation, Komachi went “hoh, hoh” and nodded.

“Please let me see those surveys or whatever.”

Komachi shot her hands out and Yukinoshita gently handed over the stack of papers. She tilted her head up and down, nodding as she sifted through the papers one by one.

“…I see, I think I have the gist of what everyone’s generally worried about.”

Quick to comprehend and adapt truly made her a capable little sister. Even the problem this time, she quickly understood it. Well, putting Zaimokuza aside, the insecurities regarding marriage life in the future for Miura and Kawasaki were understandable. Not discussing Ebina-san was a no brainer, right?

Komachi and the rest of us all reached a common understanding of the situation.

“Uh huh, it’s just we’re not sure how to go from here.”

“We can’t just put these out as they are now… It’d be really helpful if you had any ideas about what to do.”

After Yuigahama and Yukinoshita spoke, Komachi placed her index finger on her temple, doing circular motions while thinking.

“Fumu fumu… Ha! Komachi light bulb!”

She then clapped her hands, making a slapping sound. This bizarre dramatic acting was fishy… It looked like she wasn’t thinking of anything good… But regardless of my unease, the other three sent her stares full of expectation. Having received those looks, Komachi erected her index finger and triumphantly began speaking.

“For now, based on these surveys, everyone’s hopelessly lacking in wife points. We need to start off with raising those points.”

“What the heck are ‘wife points’…?”

“Don’t worry about the trivialities. Basically, we’ll shift the direction of the plan to how to become more like a bride!”

She nonchalantly ignored my concerns and on top of that, she even started to redirect the direction of the plan. Listening to Komachi’s energetic words, Hiratsuka-sensei spoke up.

“Fumu, so it’s something like a bridal training course.”

“That’s a good phrase! Komachi will take it! ☆”

She performed a bizarre gesture as if writing a memo in her palm, stood up, and loudly proclaimed.

“Without further ado… We will now begin the bridal training course! Thump, thump ♪ Wife points showdown~!! Don don, pafu pafu!”

Yukinoshita, Hiratsuka-sensei, and I shot dubious stares at Komachi, but for some reason, only Yuigahama was enthusiastically clapping her hands.

“Like I said, what the heck are ‘wife points’…?”

It looked like I wouldn’t be getting the answer to my concerns for an eternity.

× × ×

The wife points showdown or whatever was to be done on another day because Komachi had some preparations to do on her end.

And that day was upon us. Although we gathered at the club room, as Komachi had instructed, the group of girls were nowhere to be seen.

And now I had to wait for some time for them to get in contact with me.

In the meantime, I was left alone in the Service Club room and was forced to kill some time. Well, it’s not like that’s a bad thing or anything. Since ages ago, I was super good at holding the forte while everyone was out anyway.

As I was absorbed in reading while waiting for them, my cellphone phone vibrated. Upon checking, it was a mail from Komachi.

…Just what exactly was she planning to do by having everyone gather at the home economics room? But, well, when it came to requests from my little sister, the one who typically saw to them were me.

I gallantly left the club room and headed for the home economics room.

The hallway afterschool with no signs of people was comfortable. It was submerged in a silence that seemed like a lie from its normally boisterous levels.

But as I approached the home economics room, it was oddly getting noisier. I could even hear shrieks sometimes running down the hallway too.

Hey, hey… It was starting to get too scary to enter the home economics room now…

But I was already at front of the door.

I mustered my courage and opened the door.

When I did, Komachi was wearing an apron, standing by waiting for me.

“Ah, finally here. Okay, let’s get started, onii-chan.”

“Exactly what’s getting started…?”

After I asked, Komachi took a daunting pose and placed her hands on her hips.

“Starting now is the bridal training! Thump, thump ☆ wife points showdown~♪!”

When she exclaimed in a high voice, Komachi revealed a ladle from behind her. What’s this? What BØY[9] were you trying to be?

Once she set herself up by pretending the ladle was a microphone, she did a jerking turn to behind her.

“We’ll start off first with a cooking showdown!”

Ahead of where she turned to were three people sporting the same apron appearance as Komachi: Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and Hiratsuka-sensei. Sitting at the table situated further in were two familiar faces.

“We look forward to working with all of our judges!”

In response to Komachi’s call, one person waved his hands.

“I’m not sure why I was called here, but… Everyone, do your best!”

“Fumuu, the less you explain, the deeper it is, this setting as of late. Very well! I, the Master Swordsman, will play along with your games!”

They were Totsuka and Zaimokuza. Did Komachi call these two here? When I got confused, Komachi pointed at the table seat.

“Okay, onii-chan, please have a seat at the judge’s seat.”

So it looked like those in aprons would make food while the people designated at the seats would judge. I wasn’t getting a good feeling, but even if I was unwilling here, Komachi would do this and that to force my participation.

Just as I was instructed, I took my position at the seat prepared for me.

Frankly, I had a lot of doubts regarding this development. But amongst them, there was just one thing that bothered me the most that I had to make sure of.

“Should Totsuka really be sitting here? Hey, should he be here?”

I figured I’d ask Komachi, but she nonchalantly ignored me, and turned around to face Yuigahama and the others. Hold on, wasn’t ignoring me like that a little mean?

“The theme is a boy’s desired homemade cooking. And the first batter up is Yui-san!”

Upon her announcement, Yuigahama readily took a step forward. In her hands was a plate with a metallic lid that I sworn I had seen in a high class restaurant before

"Um, the menu is…"

"Japanese hamburger!"

In the middle of Komachi's questioning, Yuigahama answered. At the same time, she removed the metallic lid and showcased her dish as if it was an artifact she had confidence in. But the reaction of Komachi who laid her eyes on it wasn't so positive.

"…Err—"

Komachi was completely baffled. Understandable.

Dripping all over the deeply blackened body of mass was sauce. There were also deep brown fried vegetables along with tattered green onions.

…Japanese? Which part was? If anything, there wasn't a hint of Japanese in this dish because it looked like it was the scene of a volcano… It was the kind of visual where if you mentioned the Kilauea volcano, I'd probably believe it. In the first place, where was the hamburger element in it? Then again, was this edible?

Despite my retreating, Zaimokuza gallantly reached out with his hand, apparently getting high spirited from the thought of eating a girl's handmade cooking.

"Goramu goramu. Nano, nano, Nanjiro! It is as they say of ages past. That one should not judge from what you see before you. It is likely that there exists a hidden brilliance in this dish deep within its exterior…"

Zaimokuza was unusually spouting some impressive words, but in reality, he wasn't saying anything correct, since the words he spoke were a little empty.

When he carried the hamburger to his mouth, Zaimokuza moaned "mu!" as if he was enlightened with a divine oracle and popped opened his eyes.

"Buhebo!"

When he made a super subdued groan, he fell flat on the desk. He didn't move a single inch since then. The inside of the room buzzed into silence.

The criminal was someone amongst us…

Komachi stared at Zaimokuza and after confirming that he may not be coming back to this world, she spun towards me.

"Ummmm, since the Chuuni-san collapsed, next is… Onii-chan."

"Eh?"

When I became bewildered from being pointed at, Yuigahama's cooking slid into my view.

“Guh…”

I sank into silence when the cooking with the horrific visual stared at me.

Even if Zaimokuza was known to have absurdly, annoying overreactions, for him to be damaged that much made me unable to muster my courage. As I stiffly sat there, Yuigahama caressed the bun of her hair as she laughed, trying to gloss it over

“Hi-Hikki, y-you don’t have to force yourself to eat it…”

She averted her down casted eyes and made a feigned laugh. No, if I could, I wouldn’t force myself at all. They did tend to say “where might is master, justice is servant” after all.

But even so, I couldn’t just throw in the towel here. I had to give my gratitude for being given life. Not to mention Zaimokuza already fulfilled the victim quota and, well, also, um, you know. It’s not so often this kind of opportunity came along.

Aah, besides, there was no way I could allow Totsuka to consume any of this.

In order to charge up my courage, I sent a look to Totsuka who was beside me.

“Hachiman? Is something wrong?”

As if my abrupt look to Totsuka was strange, Totsuka tilted his head and smiled.

I want to protect this smile…

Right now, the only one who could protect it was me. Might’s coming through, so get lost justice.

With a strong will, I took my chopsticks. I then grabbed the plate and threw everything into my mouth.

Crush, bite, gulp. In just that one bite, the curtains to the Koshien[10] of Hellish Tastes were raised.

“Hikki…”

It felt like Yuigahama was looking at me with teary eyes and quite frankly, I was the one in tears, but that wasn’t something I could possibly say out loud.

With everyone watching me with abated breath, I somehow managed to swallow everything.

The home economics room filled with silence and only the sound of the chopsticks I put down reverberated.

I let out a small breath and slowly opened my mouth.

“Yeah… Well, how should I say this? If you prepare yourself and forcibly eat it, it’s not something you could not eat…”

It had zero human points, let alone wife points.

“Your comment’s too weird!”

Yuigahama let out a heartbroken scream, but if you’re going to say something like that, try a little harder… Because I most certainly did.

“I’m not sure what to think if you’re saying that with a blue face like that…”

Yukinoshita looked somewhat fed up and astonished and Komachi quickly lined up next to her.

“Next is Yukino-san!”

With Komachi urging her, Yukinoshita carried over her cooking. In the same manner as Yuigahama’s plate from earlier, her plate was covered with a metallic lid of the sort.

“Please present your menu!”

“I made paella…”

Upon lifting up the cover, on the plate was beautiful paella. Yuigahama raised her voice in admiration at what she had looked at.

“Oh~, Italian cooking.”

“Paella’s a Spanish dish.”

“Eh? But it was at Saizeriya[11]… Eh?”

Yuigahama was confused when Yukinoshita snappily corrected her. I understand. Saizeriya certainly did offer paella. The Mediterranean Sea Pilaf had (paella) written next to it after all.

That paella was brought to us judges. Seafood was the star of dish, lavished with meat and vegetables and with the rice simmered in saffron also appearing fresh, the distant Mediterranean Sea breeze ascended upwards.

…Well, not that I had ever been to the Mediterranean Sea though.

Since I completely devoured all of Yuigahama’s cooking earlier, I gave the honors to Totsuka. If it’s Yukinoshita’s food, then there shouldn’t be anything to worry about.

When I gave way to Totsuka, he perked up with a smile and quickly grabbed his spoon. He then took a bite.

“Woow, Yukinoshita-san, you really are a good cook!”

“It’s not that big of a deal. It’s simply a matter of getting used to it.”

There was a part of Yukinoshita who truthfully thought so, showing no concern over embarrassment of the sort. She said so in a calm manner like always.

Following Totsuka, I grabbed a bite myself. The rice was cooked properly, the balance of ingredients was good, and even my appetite was getting stimulated again. No matter what it was, I had not a single complaint. It's just that it didn't feel very bridal…

"It has a normal good taste that it's hard to comment on…"

I thought there wasn't particularly too much to say and Yuigahama raised her hand.

"Me too! I want to eat some too!"

"Okay, okay, let's all help ourselves to the dish after we finish~!"

Komachi interrupted and gently kept Yuigahama at bay.

"Now then, next is Komachi. Here you go, meat and potato stew."

She wasn't acting particularly presumptuous when she presented her food, but the one who was the most knowledgeable when it came to Komachi's cooking was none other than I. Just like always, it was delicious. Then again, why the heck was she participating in this showdown? There wasn't any meaning in increasing her wife points because she wasn't getting married any time soon.

"Yeah. Well, you know. It's like always. Also, you're trying to show off too much with your selection."

"Kuh, our closeness backfired…"

Komachi clicked her tongue as she spoke and Totsuka promptly followed up.

"But it's really good though?"

Because Totsuka had uttered so straightforwardly that his words were filled with truthful warmth, causing Komachi to shed tears.

"Uuu, Totsuka-san, you're such a good person… Your wife points are so high…"

"I feel the same way too…"

Frankly, he was without a doubt the top runner here. Komachi and I let out sighs, each of our sighs having a different meaning.

But Komachi shook her head and came back to her senses.

"Hah, not good, not good. Now, for the star performer, we have Hiratsuka-sensei."

Hiratsuka-sensei wore a daring smile, full of confidence, and proudly stepped forward as if meeting the expectations of how she was presented.

"What did sensei cook?"

"Fufufu, this!"

Tada! Came off the silver cover and what appeared was a plate full of brown colored meat. A large helping of meat and bean sprout along with a large bowl of white rice.

The meat, meat, and meat that bared forth its instincts as if a violent, animalistic nature was awakened. And then, the savory aroma that stimulated the appetite, completely squeezing out the feeling of hunger.

This combination was something I was familiar with. There was no doubt about it.

“Don’t tell me, this is!? Only the meat and bean sprouts are cooked, with the entirety of it being covered in yakiniku sauce!”

“Can you really call that cooking…?”

Yukinoshita said so in doubt, but Hiratsuka-sensei ignored her and shot me a question, full of confidence.

“How about it, Hikigaya?”

How vexing! But I couldn’t help but feel it! (The deliciousness)

I regret to say, but I had no choice but to acknowledge it…

“Delicious… It’s super delicious… The yakiniku sauce is awesome…”

“Praise me…”

Hiratsuka-sensei popped a vein at her brow and glared at me. Uh, but, if you’re going to call that cooking, even I could make it… Menu in mind, the wife points were really low, you know?

× × ×

Ultimately, unable to gauge their wife points with just cooking, we proceeded on to the next stage of the contest.

“Now then, next is the ‘What would you do at a time like this?’ wife quiz!”

When she announced with a loud voice, urging the girl group with “please have a seat” to the long table and not explaining anything, they sat in a row. On the other hand, Totsuka still remained sitting at the seat for the judges. Zaimokuza’s corpse was left as is. We couldn’t object to Komachi’s instructions since we had requested her help as the Service Club, so we had no choice but to comply obediently.

“Starting now, I’ll be asking everyone questions that will gauge your wife points. Everyone should write their answers as if they were a wife.”

Fumu, so in other words, she was doing a case study by means of a quiz, huh? So those who sat at the long desk would be the answering participants. I see. If that’s how things were going to be, where I should sit was all but natural.

“So without further ado… Er, what are you doing there, onii-chan…?”

“I’m aiming to be a full-time house husband after all.”

Komachi asked me having noticed my seat relocation, but my answer was very much simple. Since I had to act as the judge earlier in the cooking showdown, I couldn't participate, but I was confident that I had far more wife points than the girls here. I'll teach them a thing or two about what it means to be a wife.

"Hachiman, do your best!"

When Totsuka waved at me with a smile from the judge's seat, Komachi gave up going "oh well" and smiled.

"Well, whatever. Okay, let's get started~. Question: 'Your mother-in-law lodged a complaint regarding your cleaning. What do you do at a time like this?' Please write your answer on the flip board!"

Ah, so we had a flip board, huh? There certainly was one situated at where our hands were. Just when did Komachi prepare these…?

I quickly wrote down my answer without batting an eyelash. Having some extra time, I checked with how the others were doing. Yuigahama was groaning while Yukinoshita began writing her answer smoothly. Hiratsuka-sensei was mumbling something as she scribbled away.

After confirming that everyone finished, Komachi spoke up.

"Now then, your answers, bam!"

The boards were flipped over one by one as Komachi pointed at us sequentially.

The first one was Yuigahama. Yuigahama went "here we go" and flipped over her board.

"Say sorry and do it over."

It was an answer typical of Yuigahama. On TV, mother-in-laws tended to shut down any form of apology if you never got along, so I couldn't say that was a very good thing… Seemed like she'd have it tough…

After her was Yukinoshita who flipped her board with a disinterested expression.

"Explain from the start how reasonable my cleaning methods are."

Aah, this gave off THE YUKINOSHITA vibes. It looked like she'd be okay since she'd be able to shut down any arguments from her mother-in-law. In place of that, rather than her mother-in-law getting refuted, it'd be her husband who'd get refuted over and over again, so it seemed rough… For those around her.

Furthermore, Hiratsuka-sensei went "fufu" with a smile and answered.

"Talk with my fists."

Mmm. Engage in physical conversation, huh? It must be that. So it was something like having duels for brains and basically settling all problems with a duel.[12] If you were to give an extremely positive rationalization of this answer,

then it meant gaining acceptance through confrontation and forming a truce. If I were to explain it with common sense, then it was more like "what in the world was this person saying?"

And then, it was finally my turn.

I quickly flipped my board over.

"Make the seasoning extra strong in her miso soup."

You could relieve yourself of some stress by not forgetting to take your revenge. Moreover, if you redirected her attention to a new problem, she wouldn't have any more complaints regarding your cleaning. It was one of those getting revenge in an unlikely place kind of things. It was just a question of adding more salt to the wound until it was my victory…

"Hoooh~, very individualistic answers I see… For the time being, sensei and onii-chan are out."

Komachi took a sweeping look of the answers and made an "x" with her fingers and made a wry smile. No good, huuuh. Well, I guess adding extra salt might be a bit too unrealistic. Then making it sweeter would work. A sweeter taste would definitely be more noticeable.

Still, there really wasn't anything worthwhile from answers in a quiz like this… As I thought that, Komachi revealed a flip board from behind her back. It looked like she had a model answer prepared.

"A Komachi-like model answer would be this. 'Complain to my own mother and try harder tomorrow.'"

"It's such an oddly realistic answer!?"

Yuigahama answered with a slightly retreating voice. You got that right. It's kind of like being overwhelmed with that feeling of trying hard as you suffered. What? Was there someone a real handful in the family or something?

Despite the heaviness of the answer, the person in question didn't seem too bothered and cheerfully continued on.

"Let's keep going~. Here's the next question."

When she said that, Komachi spoke with a tone of acting.

"Tomorrow is Christmas. But no thanks to your good for nothing husband, this month is a bit tight…"

Looking at the sniffing Komachi whose expression sank into gloominess, Yukinoshita murmured.

"Oh, it's as if that's like a certain someone."

"That's so true."

"Well, there are men like that in the world after all. The women who support them are what you call good wives."

In response to Yuigahama's big nod, Hiratsuka-sensei answered seriously. Pardon me? Could you please stop looking at me as you say that?

Because the three spoke unanimously, they had interrupted Komachi in the middle of her reading. She placed her hands on her waist and frowned.

"I'm still in the middle of my question~… In that situation, what would you do about your child's present?"

When she finished reading the question this time, Komachi cutely tilted her head. That being the signal, everyone began writing down their answer.

The ticking sounds of the long hand of the clock and the squeaking sounds of moving pens overlapped. Once a certain amount of time had passed, Komachi spoke up.

"Tiiiime's uuup. Now then, your answer, bam!"

Just like earlier, Yuigahama was first.

"Cheap toy."

Did their grades drop or something? Well, that was probably the safest option. And so, since the kids would be completely more knowledgeable about the price of the toys than the adults, they'd surely realize there was something going on in regards to the drop in grades, right…? The result was that she might raise children that would be very mindful of the mood.

Next was Yukinoshita.

"A book."

I see. It also depended on what book was given, but a great reading experience was a bliss that couldn't be replaced for anything else. As far as cost performance was concerned, it was satisfactory. It was a very befitting answer of an avid reader.

Following her was Hiratsuka-sensei with a smile.

"A Blu-ray box of a classic anime."

That's just something you want, isn't it?

It was now my turn.

"Explain that Santa doesn't visit naughty kids."

…This was something my dad told me, I believe. That bastard… Just what were you saying to me as young as I was back then…? While it was fine that mom prepared something for me afterwards, my young heart was already resolved to hunt down Santa…

Looking at everybody's answer, Komachi tapped on her temple.

"Aaahn, it looks like everyone didn't pay close attention to the question. The core of the question lies with how to deal with the problem."

Komachi erected her finger and said. Apparently it wasn't a question about what kind of present to give to the child.

"That being said, a Komachi-like correct answer would be this."

Komachi presented her board and read it aloud.

"Leave it to their grandparents."

"Is that really fine…?"

Yukinoshita was astounded and looked at Komachi with cold eyes, but Komachi clicked her tongue as she waved her finger.

"It's okay. Grandpa and grandma are so super sweet to their grandchildren. Source is Komachi."

When I looked at Komachi who pointed at herself, I suddenly remembered. Speaking of which, that's right. Back when I was a confused little child, both grandma and grandpa were very kind.

"Well, that's true. But they tend to be sweeter with the younger one."

"The melancholy of the eldest, huh?"

Hiratsuka-sensei laughed and said it in a teasing way. No, no, it wasn't that melancholic at all. I mean even now, the one who pampers Komachi the most in my family was probably me anyway.

And the person in question, Komachi, looked at the judge's seat.

"Umm. Having seen the answers up until now, what are your thoughts so far Totsuka-san?"

Once asked, Totsuka who had been watching the entire time thought about what to say and made a sudden smile.

"Being given a book for a present seems like an amazing experience."

Alright, I know what present I'll be going with this year.

Let's go with a book. What kind of book should I get, hm…? Since he's in the tennis club, then something related would be good. Or maybe a classic fairy tale or a novel or even a legend. My recommendation would be "The Little Prince". In that case, I'll stop midway and go with "The Prince of Tennis"!

It looked like the interview with Totsuka ended as I was thinking. Komachi once again began directing.

"Okaaay, thank you very much. Well, well, this is the last question."

When she said that, Komachi started up a little play.

"'Recently, my husband has been coming home late… Could it be an affair?' What would you do at a time like this? Now, please put your answers on the flip board!"

At the participant seats, Yuigahama groaned over and over, Yukinoshita was quiet pretending not to recognize anything except for broadly grinning and Hiratsuka-sensei was blabbering about something while molding her hands into a fist while actively making noises with her fingers. This was a little late, but I really didn't like sitting here…

I wrote down my answer on the board hoping for this to hurry up and end already and Komachi announced the end of the thinking time.

"And time's up~. Now then, let's see all your answers at once."

Komachi extended both her hands outwards and then everyone simultaneously spoke their answers.

"Be worried."

The way Yuigahama spoke was already worried.

"Hunt him down."

Yukinoshita's tone was sharp like an edged tool.

"The fist of punishment."

Hiratsuka-sensei clutched her fist as she answered.

"Get consolation money, child support and divorce."

When I presented my board and spoke, Komachi nodded as she looked at each one.

"Looks like everyone's presented their answer~."

I emulated Komachi as she examined the answers one by one and looked at every other answer. And my eyes stopped on one of them.

"What the heck do you mean by "hunt him down"… That's super scary…"

When I said that, Yukinoshita tilted her head with a blank face.

"Oh, I must have mistaken it for question him. However, it boils down to the same thing."

She then made a smile. Scary. What's with this person? Scary. It wasn't just me because Totsuka and Yuigahama and of course Hiratsuka-sensei were shocked too.

But it looked like it wasn't something entirely out of the question as an answer for Komachi.

"Putting aside onii-chan's answer, everyone else's is on the right track, buuut a correct Komachi-like answer would be something like this."

She then raised her own flip board.

"'Believe in him.' This has a lot of Komachi points."

The girl group let out an “ooh” in admiration as if she concluded things on a good note of the sort. To be in middle school and have this awareness, or rather conversely, it’s exactly because she was in middle school that she was watching a dream. Either way, with this kind of answer, once she was betrayed, she’d end going through a terrible experience.

I didn’t think at all that believing was necessarily the one solution to every situation. Not believing, in other words, suspecting was a self-defense mechanism of your own heart. The act of abandoning that form of defense was no different from hurting yourself.

“Is that really okay?”

When I asked her with eyes full of doubt and caution, Komachi cutely tilted her head.

“Mmm, the person Komachi likes would probably be someone who’d look like he wouldn’t get involved in an affair. And since he’d be honest to a fault as well as a hinedere[13]-san, I wouldn’t have to worry too much.”

“…Is there really someone like that out there?”

Is she an idiot…? In the first place, an incomprehensible guy who was weirdly honest to a fault and was twisted was definitely no one decent. Aim for a better guy.

“You’d be surprised.”

Komachi showed an embarrassing smile, but she immediately jumped right back into her usual high spirited self.

“Now then, it’s the long awaited final match!”

She raised her voice and with that, it was finally the start of the closing heart thumping wife points showdown.

Like I said, what the heck are wife points?

× × ×

I sat absentmindedly in the home economics class, being forced to wait for quite a bit of time.

It looked like Totsuka was pulled away from the middle of his club activities so he went back. Just before leaving, he mentioned what a bummer that he wouldn’t get to see everyone in wedding dresses, but I was more bummed out by the fact that I wouldn’t get to see Totsuka in a wedding dress instead… No, given the occasion, I wouldn’t mind seeing him in a tuxedo either! In fact, I want to see him in one!

As I was engrossed in my lone, mute emotions, the door clattered open and Komachi came in.

When I looked, she was in a wedding dress.

It was an unorthodox dress with a mini-skirt. As for the cloth, instead of being pure white, it had a yellowish huge, making prominent a healthy, bright, and lively cuteness.

With her new appearance, Komachi's spirits were higher than even before.

"Happy, Embarassing Bride Outfit Showdown~! And so that being the case, Komachi changed into a dress too. Onii-chan, looky, looky!"

"Yeah, yeah, you're the cutest in the world."

When I said that, Komachi shoulders made a clacking sound when they dropped and the motivation in her voice vanished.

"There it is. Saying whatever he wants again. Well, whatever. Now then, we'll start off the show with Yui-san."

After Komachi made her announcement when she faced the door, the sound of the door timidly clattering open could be heard.

Yuigahama peeked in only with her head and looked around the room restlessly. Finally looking like she made her resolve, she entered the room.

The cloth of her dress was pink in color, an appearance with a brilliant glamor which served to complement Yuigahama's hair color. The short skirt was fluffed out and surpassing what I had thought, it made it more conspicuous how slender her legs were. The expanded skirt wrapped around her waist and her boldly exposed chest area with the glimmering spangle and lamé was bright. Frankly, it was hard to look at her directly.

Whether it was because she was nervous or she wasn't used to wearing the dress, her struts were awkward and stiff. When our eyes met, her cheeks turned flush red as if being in the wedding dress was really embarrassing after all. I could sense her embarrassment as well and it was starting to infect me too, so please stop glancing at me…

When Yuigahama finally made her way beside Komachi, she moved behind Komachi as if using her as a shield.

"Um… Ko-Komachi-chan, where'd you get this?"

"Ahaaan, it's a secret ♪."

Komachi winked and brushed it off. She probably borrowed them from the rival companies involved in the plan. She was my little sister that didn't leave a nook or cranny unturned.

"Okay, okay, next is Yukino-saan!"

When Komachi called her name, the door opened without a sound. And then, gracefully entering the room without even the slightest sound of footsteps was Yukinoshita.

Everyone instinctively held their breaths.

The pure white dress was elegantly arced in such a way that served to emphasize the lines of her body. Her bosom gave presence to the flower decorations and the gentle-sloping curves lustrously stretched around her feet like the fins of a mermaid. From her head, the long, long laced veil hung from her head resembled a blanket of piling snow atop her jet black hair. The dress didn't try to hide her pure white skin. In fact, it was kindly encompassing her as if to promote that beauty.

Behind the covering of the veil, Yukinoshita closed her eyes and slowly walked in a manner to conceal her face.

"…Why me as well?"

I could hear that mutter escape from her veil.

She seemed rather upset. Even if she couldn't be seen acting tough, it was easy to tell from her aura, and I mean just her aura. When her veil lightly fluttered, you could see a glimpse of her cheeks mixed with discontent and flushed bright red from embarrassment.

"Ooh, she is most certainly upset… Not even the veil can hide her true nature…"

"…What was that?"

A glare packed with coldness and intensity pierced me from behind the veil. It had to be that. Just like how the white kimono had the bridal headdress, the veil of the dress should be expected to have a similar effect. Although it seemed like it didn't really have that effect for Yukinoshita.

Yukinoshita lined up next to Yuigahama as well and Komachi observed the two with a look of satisfaction. There was just one more person left in this Bride Outfit Showdown.

"Now then, for our final contestant, Hiratsuka-sensei~♪!"

Compared to how Komachi presented the other two, she seemed more relaxed this time. It made me curious as to why it sounded like she was saying final loser instead of final contestant.

But in spite of that soft announcement, the door slowly opened. In that instant, tranquility visited the room that made everyone forget to even breathe.

Easing into the home economics room was a beautiful woman with her eyes gracefully closed, taking single steps inwards while avoiding trampling on the long, continuing veil.

When Komachi went out to the front, the one who called her out was surprised herself and grew stiff.

"…Who?"

While bewildered, Komachi squeezed out a single word. No, I was thinking the same thing…

Her black hair that was always straight was tied into a bundle, consolidated together at a slightly high position. The interweaving laces that followed from there lightly wrapped around her exposed back but even so, it was unable to hide the beautiful curvatures that extended from her nape to her shoulder blades.

The dress had an orthodox, slightly classic style and that alone emphasized the beauty of every single part of her body. Her snow white gloves were thin that stretched to her fingers and the long skirt that expanded starting from her waist which acted as a simple tube top that decorated her hips emphasized the fine details of her skin and her abundant bosom.

"Hi-Hiratsuka-sensei. So pretty…"

"She should just look like that all the time…"

Yuigahama and Yukinoshita raised their voice in admiration and surprise, being moved from the sight before them despite being of the same sex.

"Hikigaya… How is it? I'm pretty good, aren't I?"

Hiratsuka-sensei turned towards me and made a boastful laugh. It was an innocent smile that looked like she succeeded in playing a prank, filling in the missing piece of the dress.

It would've been preferable had I said something tactful at the moment, but apparently my eyes were absorbed in her appearance. When I noticed I was silent, I scratched my cheeks to try to hide my embarrassment.

"A-Aah… Well… Um… You're very pretty."

When I managed to say something, Hiratsuka-sensei blinked her eyes several times.

"…I-I see… T-Thank you."

Hiratsuka-sensei buried her face in her bouquet and mumbled. The way she was trying to hide her redness that reached up to her ears didn't coordinate with her age at all that it made her adorable. Really, just why couldn't she get married…?

With Yuigahama, Yukinoshita, and Hiratsuka-sensei gathered, this was the end of the Bride Outfit Showdown. With the final showdown over, Komachi announced with a loud voice.

"Result presentation~!"

Komachi clapped her hands as she said that and we followed in suit and gave applause as well.

She nodded in satisfaction and Komachi made a sweeping look of the home economics room.

What she looked at were the piling plates in the sink, the flip boards and signing pens, and then, the girls in wedding dresses.

After seeing everything, Komachi made a wry smile.

“Aah, everyone was totally no good~… The winner’s pretty much Koma…”

“…”

Just as she was about to finish speaking, there was a stare filled with pressure coming from somewhere. A strong will that wouldn’t allow her to say any further could be felt. I looked in the direction of where I could feel that abnormally strong will and Hiratsuka-sensei was exuding a serious murderous intent.

Even so, Komachi attempted to finish her words.

“T-The winner is…”

“……”

As if trying to run away from that stare, Komachi looked away from Hiratsuka-sensei. A sweat fell from her brow.

“The, winner, is…”

“……!”

In the face of the overwhelming intensity, Komachi faltered and her shoulders went clack as they dropped. She continued the rest of her words with a powerless voice that sounded like it would disappear.

“T-The winner is… Hiratsuka-sensei, right…”

When she spoke fragmentally, Hiratsuka-sensei made a bright smile. This person’s way too happy here…

“Mm? I-Is that so? Well, ahahaha! Wow, to think I’d be the winner, huh! I wonder if marriage Is just around the corner, hm…?”

Yuigahama made a “tahaha” strained laugh to the shamelessly blurting Hiratsuka-sensei and Yukinoshita was silently amazed and let out a brief sigh. Komachi approached me with a sobbing voice going “fuee”, sniffed her nose, and wiped her tears.

“I-I was scared…. I was sooo scared…”

“There, there…”

As I patted Komachi’s head while cheering her up, something suddenly came to mind. That’s right. It’s because she had a part of her that was like this that Hiratsuka-sensei couldn’t get married, huh…

Looking at Hiratsuka-sensei who was celebrating by herself, Yuigahama clapped her hands as if she thought up of something.

“Ah, since we went through the trouble, let’s take a picture together!”

“Ah, that sounds nice! C’mon, onii-chan.”

Komachi who heard the suggestion suddenly made a smile. I knew she was faking your tears, but onii-chan wanted her to try just a little bit harder… And then, since we had to take the picture, she pushed on me from behind.

“Don’t push…”

When I was pushed to the front of the window where the glow of the setting sun began to shine through, standing there was Yukinoshita moved to the side as if trying to avoid me. She then tried to fade out from there.

“I’ll refrain.”

Although she said that, Yuigahama who was waiting in her path caught her.

“C’mon, Yukinon too.”

“Don’t cling onto me…”

Yuigahama pulled Yukinoshita along right towards the middle. She then pulled me closer by my sleeve.

“Don’t pull on me…”

“Yeah, yeah!”

She made a pleasant smile, further pulling on Yukinoshita’s arms and mine.

“We’re all ready to go here! I’m taking the picture!”

When Komachi finished setting the camera on her cellphone, likely using an automatic timer, she flew towards us.

“This isn’t so bad every now and then, right?”

Hiratsuka-sensei said with a gentle tone. She stood next to me and gently placed her hand on my shoulder. Well, if it’s every now and then. Ah, I’ll send the picture to Totsuka afterwards.

And then, the sound of the shutter echoed in the evening home economics room.

× × ×

It was late at night on Friday, a few days since the Wife Points Showdown.

We had our dinner and the only ones remaining in the living room was Komachi and I, my parents already having gone to sleep.

I was slumped on the sofa looking at my laptop while listening to the sound of Komachi washing the dishes in the kitchen. It completely went over my head, but we had to write a column that would be used on the page of the local magazine. Starting tomorrow was a weekend so if I concentrated late into the night, I should be able to make some progress.

Mammals were supposedly nocturnal beasts by nature. Since I was a mammal as well, I would be much more active during the night. Really, I want to do some breastfeeding.

I wrestled with the manuscript that I had yet to write a single word for, wondering what I should write for the thing they called a column. There was barely any time left until the deadline. Just what the heck did we do up until now, but that's not it, seeee? Nothing's just coming to mind, seeee? Do you understand this feeling, hm? You probably don't riiiight? Because I totally don't. Whatever, let's just hurry up and write something.

I would repeatedly write and erase, erase and write, gradually getting things solidified in the process. My hands would stop whenever I contemplated about the things I needed to write and my language. The time I spent playing Kancolle on the side began to become longer than the time I spent typing away on the keyboard.

I guess this was as far as I could go for today huh…

Just as I was about to call it a day, the cellphone which I left on the table further away rumbled. The vibration notified me of an incoming call. Aah, but I couldn't move my hands right now.

When I gave up and ignored it, Komachi turned off the faucet with a squeak and she returned from the kitchen while drying her hands with a towel. On her way back, she grabbed my cellphone and tossed it to me.

"Onii-chan, phone."

"Mm."

The phone went smack when I caught it. Well, since she got me the phone and all, there was no way I couldn't pick up the phone now. Upon looking at the display, the caller was Yuigahama. I rested the cellphone on my shoulders all the while having an idea of what she was calling me for and started the phone as I did work.

"Hello?"

"Ah, Hikki, are you done?"

Bullseye. It was about the manuscript. If I had it done, I would've sent it over to you, jeez.

"Like it'd be that easy. Are you guys done on your end?"

"Uh huh, I drew the pictures. Yukinon is putting everything together. Once we get Hikki's manuscript, we're all done."

Yukinoshita was doing the editing and compiling while Yuigahama was doing cut-out illustrations. It was a division of labor where each of us was assigned a job based on our aptitude.

Then again, the fact that they were waiting on my manuscript put unnecessary pressure which caused my hands to move slower though… When I went slightly quiet, being a little apologetic, I could hear a faint voice on the other end.

"Is he already finished?"

It was apparently Yukinoshita. Oh, was Yuigahama staying the night at Yukinoshita's? Those two sure were hitting it off, hm…?

"Eh? Oh, okay. She asked if you're done already."

I could still hear Yuigahama's voice, clear as ever. It looked like the phone was picking up Yukinoshita's voice who didn't seem to have been all that farther away.

"Not yet."

"He said not yet. Eh, okay, I'll ask."

It sounded like Yuigahama was talking with Yukinoshita. There was a small pause before she answered again.

"She asked when you'll be done."

"No clue… Then again, this middleman business is a real pain."

There wasn't a need to play this telephone game, was there…? When I said that, on the other end of the phone was the exchange, "could you switch with me?" "okay, here", that was slightly audible.

"Hello."

"Yo."

The one who spoke on the phone was Yukinoshita. Speaking of which, this might've been the first time we've ever spoken on the phone. While thinking those kinds of things, Yukinoshita went straight to the point.

"When will you be done?"

I reflexively winced to her usual, unchanging cold tone. Even on the phone, her words were packed with a forcible pressure.

"S-Sometime this week…"

When I stuttered on my words due to the slight feelings of guilt taking its toll on me, a small sigh could be heard from the other end of the phone.

"Today's Friday, so I can assume by 'sometime this week' you mean today, right? Do you know when the deadline is?"

"B-By Monday…"

"That's called next week. We'll leave your column blank and move on ahead. Once you're done, send it over."

"Right. Ah, by send, you mean"

"Bye."

She hung up the phone, not bothering to wait for me to finish my reply. Only the sound of buzzing could be heard. I glared at my phone and muttered to myself.

"…How can I send you anything if I don't know your address?"

That's why, no matter how hard I tried, the delivery of the manuscript would be pushed to Monday anyway. It couldn't be helped. It was Yukinoshita's fault for not listening to me properly… Well, the fact I wouldn't meet the deadline made us even, yep.

I let out a brief sigh, being relieved from finishing that phone call. I flung my cellphone aside and rotated my shoulders.

But there wasn't much time left to work. It was a real pain, so let's get this over with quickly.

When I reengaged with the computer once again, coffee was offered to me before my eyes.

I looked up and Komachi was standing with two cups, one in each hand.

I took a cup from her with gratitude and Komachi took a seat next to me. It looked like she was going to stay awake and hang around.

"You don't need to wait for me or anything."

I wasn't really sure how long it'd take. I might even have to stay up all night. When I said that, she shook her head.

"It's okay. I want to read it so I'll wait."

"…If you say so."

Well, tomorrow's a weekend. It should be fine even if it's a little later than usual. After taking a sip of my coffee and saying that, I began typing away on the keyboard.

Working alone usually meant I'd take it easy, but with someone waiting on me nearby, the only thing I could do was put in some effort and get things done.

In hoping to get as done as soon as possible, I continued to write and write with my poor writing and the pages and time began to pile.

In the quietness of the night, the sound of key presses echoed. Occasionally, only the sound of falling water droplets could be heard.

During that time, amongst all those sounds, there was a faint breathing of someone sleeping.

Having finished a majority of the piece and thinking that there was just a little more left, I took a look to my side and Komachi was dozing off.

With the comfortable weight resting against my shoulders, I closed my eyes for a split moment.

However, it was that instant.

Without waking up Komachi, I quietly hammered in the final paragraph that flashed by in my head.

Whether it is marriage or the future, no one knows what will happen down the road.

Common sense of the world dictates that to prepare meant to bring forth new sorrow.

But the right to wish for happiness is something held by everyone.

The effort for what is to come should not be neglected. In conclusion, the fine ladies of the world should claim a full-time house husband of their dreams before it is too late. And done.

Short Story 2

Of course, **Hikigaya Hachiman's** kindness is twisted.

Fall began to intensify, with the sporadic leaves starting to turn crimson in color. The symptoms of change were visible to the naked eye, as little as it was. The club that I resided in also saw a small change as of late.

"Chiba Prefecture Problem Consultation Mails~!"

Yuigahama was inexplicably in high spirits, calling out the title in a weird way. While adding drumming and puffing noises, she gave a round of applause by herself, but Yukinoshita and my stares were cold.

This was the "small change" that I mentioned. Hiratsuka-sensei added to the Service Club activities the consultation of problems in the form of mails from all over, an impromptu idea that she came up with.

Still energetic from earlier, Yuigahama read a mail aloud.

"Mmkay, today's first correspondence is a letter from a resident of Chiba, Pen Name: I'm Worried-san."

Did this person not know what a pen name was? It was more like the title of the mail instead. The instructions "Please read the instructions carefully" were written there, so this person must've been the type that wouldn't read those at all. Tch, like there'd be any advice for people who didn't abide by the rules of the mail. I wasn't feeling motivated at all now.

[Now that the upper classmen have retired, I will be taking up the role as the president of the tennis club. How should I get everyone to follow me? If there's something I need to be careful of, please tell me. I look forward to your reply.]

…Hahaan, I see. So this person mistook the pen name and cutely wrote the title there instead. Gosh, to make such an adorable, slight error like this, there's no doubt this person was cute while worriedly sick.

"Alright, let's get the show on the road and get this answered!"

"He got motivated all of a sudden somehow…"

Putting aside Yuigahama who was surprised as well as shocked, I moved the conversation along in a hurry so we could arrive at a solution.

"Okay, first, Yukinoshita who's serving as a club president as well. Your thoughts?"

"…Let's see, if you're fine with my personal thoughts on the matter, that is."

Once Yukinoshita, who had been continuously reading the entire time not concerned with what was going on, had her name called her, she closed her book and took a slight thinking posture.

“The first step in control is to start from the display of your excellence. Once you’re standing at the top, then what follows is oppression, information manipulation, and thorough political purging. If you keep up this political reign for about a year, then it should be enough to keep everyone at bay.”

Yukinoshita said with a sweet smile. That smile of yours was really scary, you know…

“Mmm, but in reality, I wonder, huh? I mean if you just say leadership, it might sound good and all, but if you go too far, people will end up disliking it instead.”

“Well, that’s true. I mean, some club president out there would do things however she pleased or even would act overbearing, nothing close to leadership. Not to mention she wasn’t popular.”

“Could you stop looking my way while you’re saying that…?”

Yukinoshita spoke while making a frown. Surprisingly, she was aware of her own personality and she might’ve been concerned about it in her own way… If you’re concerned about it, then fix it.

“W-Well, let’s just say leaders have a lot of baggage to deal with!”

When Yuigahama smoothed it over, she began writing the reply to the mail.

[A club president isn’t just about standing at the front and pulling everyone along. Isn’t a club president who supports everyone just as fine as well? But going too far with it will push everyone away, so be mindful of that. Try your best!]

Okay, that’s one case settled. To get started on the next mail, Yuigahama read it aloud.

“Ummm, the next correspondence is… a correspondence from a resident of Chiba, Pen Name: Master Swordsman Shogun-san.”

This guy again… Because he was sort of like a regular customer, I couldn’t help but be a little happy, so stop it.

[I hear as of late on the net that writing in Japanese will allow me to claim first place for the Light Novel Rookie of the Year award, but that was certainly not the case. Source is I. Explain in great detail how I can claim first.]

After the mail was read, Yukinoshita showed a baffled expression.

“Shouldn’t he fix his grammar in this mail first…?”

“What’s written here makes no sense…” said Yuigahama.

I’m pretty sure his Japanese level was pretty much on par with yours.

“In short, it’s a problem of how he can take the Rookie of the Year award and make his debut.”

I explained and made a fleeting glance at Yuigahama. My eyes asked her for her opinion, but she made an incredibly unpleasant face.

“Eeeh? But isn’t this like totally Hikki’s forte? Hikki should answer it.”

Yukinoshita tilted her head, nodding in agreement.

“Telling him harshly is also a form of kindness.”

Once Yukinoshita said what she wanted to say, she dropped her gaze to the book at her hands and went back to reading.

Fumu. Then, how about something like this? I pulled the computer closer to me and began writing the answer.

[It’s just the people who read your work and don’t recognize it and the editorial department that are strange. Have some confidence and keep going as you are now. Continue chasing your dream until your last moment without giving up, trying your best for eternity.]

After a feeling of satisfaction from finishing the answer, I let out a sigh. The misuse of the words “last moment” and “until the end” was the main point.[1]

“Oooh, Hikki’s so nice.”

“…Kindness sure is cruel.”

Yuigahama who peeked at the screen was innocently surprised while Yukinoshita softly averted her seemingly sad eyes.

Well, let’s just say that there’s another side to kindness.

Problem
Consultation Mail

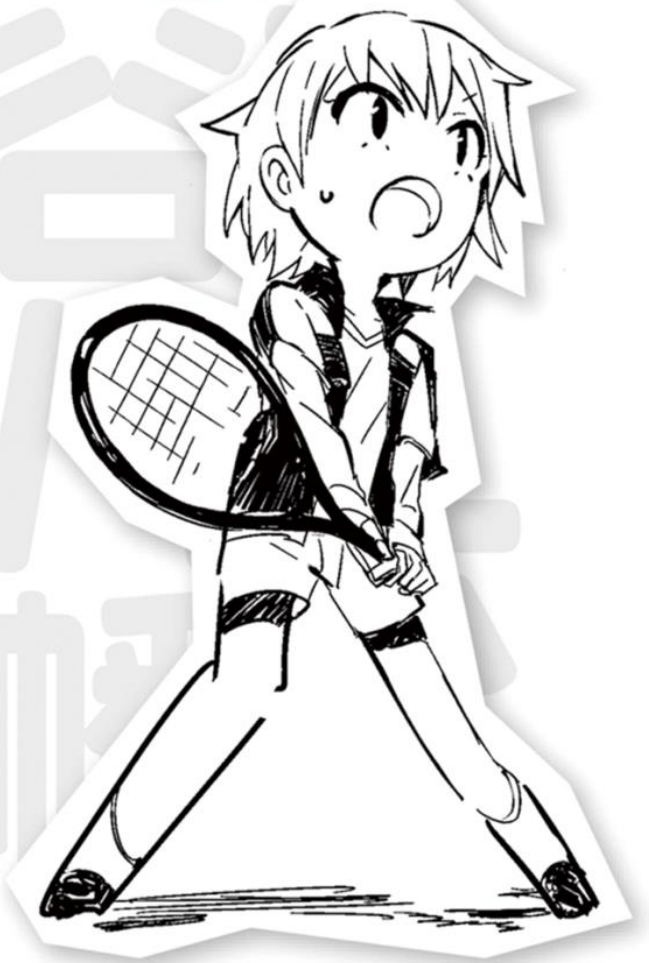
from: Master Swordsman Shogun

I hear as of late that writing in Japanese

will allow me to claim first place for the

Light Novel Rookie of the Year award.

S.S. 2



Bonus Track

Hikigaya Komachi's Tactics

Drama CD

Were we not born to play? Were we not born to frolic?[1]

That was stated in a paragraph in the "Ryoujin Hishou"[2], but suppose that the very reason people were born was to play. If so, life was to play and everything in this world was to play.

Be that as it may, just what was it that "to play" was referring to?

"To play" was an expression with various meanings, its definition moreover vaguely phrased, and it certainly wasn't a matter of conduct.

For example, "hey, hey, miss, let's go have some fun!" If this was used, then it made you think normalfags should go die. "You wanted to have fun with me, huh!?" If this was used instead, really, normalfags should go die.

Cooking with a playful mindset typically ended in disasters and whenever your attempts at something failed, "I was just playing around~" was enough of an excuse to keep things as they were.

In other words, there was absolutely nothing good about something like playing.

On the same note, if life's purpose was to play around, since there was nothing good about playing, then there was nothing good about life itself.

But being able to easily imagine the lives of these people playing around becoming terrible; that's the Ryoujin Hishou for you. The Cloistered Emperor Go-Shirakawa didn't go bald gracefully. It was that hardship that made his baldness. With him side by side next to Bruce Willis and Nicholas Cage, they should be proclaimed as "The Great Three Baldies of the World".

Being bald was cool, being bald was a status; I felt that betting on the continued development of those values than on trying to grow out the strands of hair on your head had more possibilities.

So putting that aside, all in all, the phrase "to play" and what conduct it referred to was something that, by all means, should be questioned.

Just what would happen if all you did was play? It wasn't complicated to build a disastrous future off of that.

But in accordance with history, "people who played around can change their job to a Sage at level 20."

That's why, well, you know… Maybe playing around just a little might not be so bad…

× × ×

Yuigahama's birthday party started from a proposal, well not really, but from a chain of events.

Yuigahama and Yukinoshita. Then there was Totsuka who we met on the way and Komachi who was waiting at the meeting place. Furthermore was Zaimokuza who accompanied us due to our humane consideration and with me included, these members headed for karaoke and it was there that I laid my eyes upon something that I shouldn't have.

It was a lone female teacher around thirty who was killing time alone at karaoke after being driven away from a party for marriage prospects. So you're singing an Enka about all of that huh…

When that thirtyish female teacher singing the Enka of her party for marriage prospects spotted us, she let out a sorrowful voice and ran off.

The rainy season's sultry air subsided in the evening with the refreshing wind that blew towards the ocean.

Riding along that wind was a heartbreaking wail that found its way to my ears.

"I want to get married…"

It was boundlessly simplistic and straightforward desire that echoed in the night city.

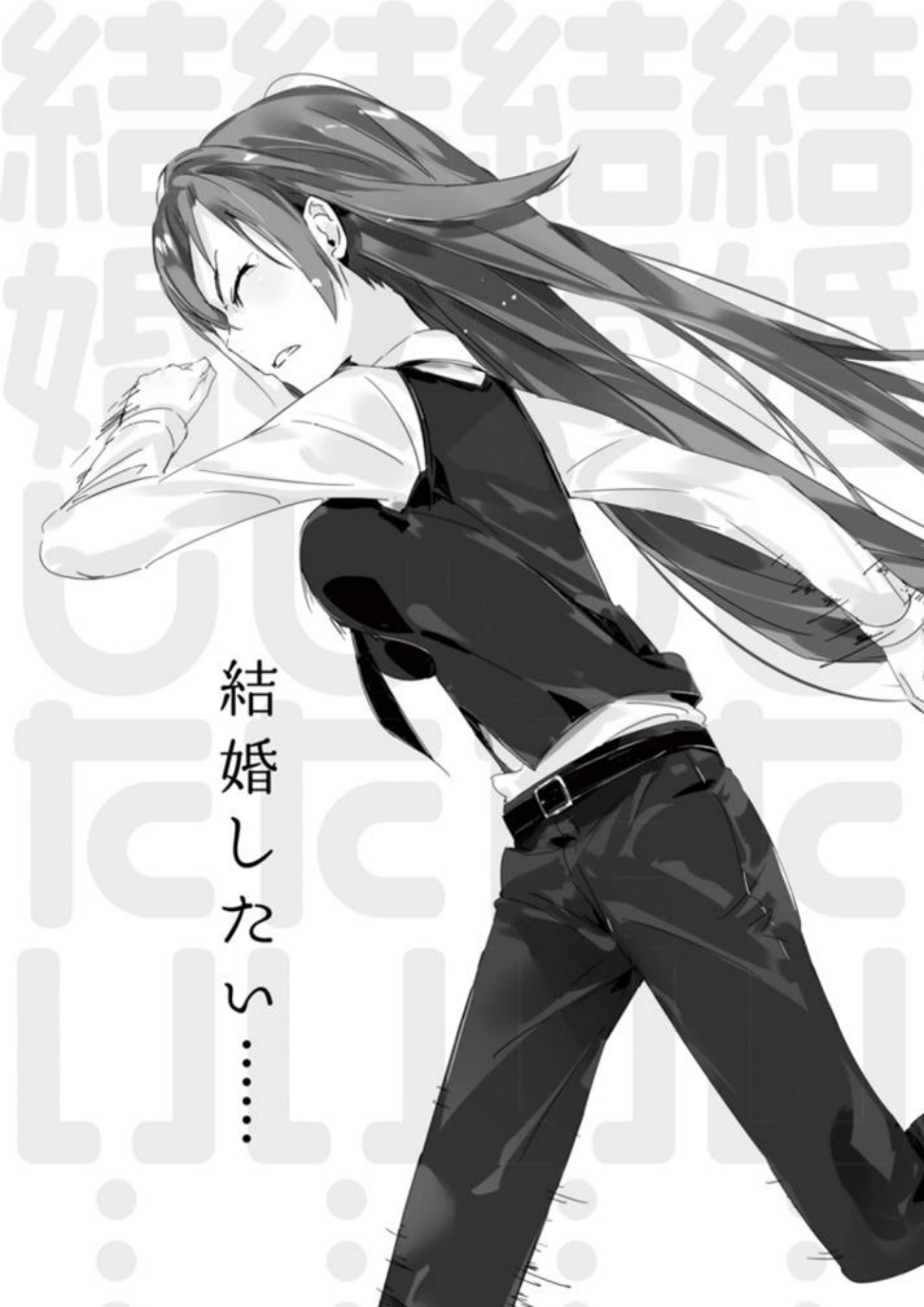
I had no idea whether it was the Doppler Effect or the PaRappa effect, or whatever effect, but her voice wouldn't leave my ears at all, oddly enough. If anything, my eyes were getting moist and my heart was aching. What the heck was this? Was this some sort of mustard gas effect of the sort?

Apparently I wasn't the only one suffering from the pains at my chest because everyone present gazed in the direction where Hiratsuka-sensei had disappeared off to.

Not a single word was spoken by anyone, but the most level-headed individual in the group, Totsuka, spoke up with a worried voice.

"Hi-Hiratsuka-sensei. She was crying when she ran off, do you think she's, okay…?"

That's Totsuka for you. He's so kind. I really thought so. Somehow looking timid, the way he was glancing in the direction of the corner where Hiratsuka-sensei turned was super kind (primarily in my eyes).


結婚したい……

Conversely, the voice that answered was harsh and cold.

“She’s already a fine adult, so she should be fine.”

After Yukinoshita lightly flicked her hair away, she said in a calm demeanor. If only this girl stayed quiet, then she’d look kind to me too… But she wasn’t wrong in the least. In fact, she was too correct. I found myself agreeing with her opinion.

“Pretty much. Then again, she’s too much of a fine adult already, what with her age and all.”

I mean really, she’s a fine adult, so someone please take her already.

“Fumuu, those courageous words that laugh at danger[3]… The hymns of humans are the hymns of courage!”

With a quivering expression, the nearby Zaimnokuza wiped the sweat off his brow and then blurted out loud, being even more annoying and oppressive than before.

“Well, putting that aside, the birthday party sure was fun.”

The one who subtly sidestepped that solemn voice was Komachi. As expected of the Hikigaya household’s final weapon of communication. Zaimokuza whom everyone was hesitant in interacting with was smoothly pushed to the side.

After that, a smile floated on Yuigahama’s face, she too being the owner of the worrisome communication skill.

“Thanks a lot for today, Komachi-chan, everyone.”

Komachi returned a smile to Yuigahama’s and Yukinoshita who was watching over them quietly looked relieved. Well, Yukinoshita was being considerate in a lot of ways too.

Good work.

A look of appreciation, or so I’d like to send her, but it looked like it would’ve made her once in a blue moon good mood to go sour, so I kept it to myself.

If Yuigahama was pleased with everything, then this was good enough.

And besides, it’s not like the time we spent was boring at all for me or anything.

“It was so fun that we ended up forgetting about the time, huh?”

In light of Totsuka’s words, Zaimokuza and I adjusted our eyes to our watches.

“Indeed, as you say, it is already this late. The time for darkness will soon befall us…”

For some reason, Zaimokuza leering distantly towards the faraway sun that was setting in the west sky dyed in crimson, but were I to accompany him in doing this, the sun really would settle, so I nonchalantly ignored him.

“I guess. Anyway, I’m heading home. See you.”

“Ah, okay. See you later.”

Yuigahama saw me off as she reservedly waved her hands. When I raised my hand slightly in response, at the corner of my eyes creeping up to Yuigahama with something in mind was Komachi.

“Sparkle! Yui-san!”

Yuigahama let out a bewildered “hoe!?” to Komachi’s sudden appearance and Komachi talked in a small voice. What was she planning on doing…? With an unsettling premonition tugging at me, I slowly walked on, but every bit of Komachi’s words reached my ears.

“Are you okay with us going home like this…? This may not mean much coming from me as his little sister, but my brother going outside at all is SR, in other words, super rare… The next time he’ll go outside is… Glance.”

Komachi looked at me as she spoke unnaturally. After that, the speed of Yuigahama’s waving hands slowed as if she was in the middle of thinking. And then, her hands abruptly stopped.

“Next time, next time… Wait up. Wait uuup!”

Yuigahama chased after me with the tapping sounds of footsteps.

“L-Let’s hang out a bit more!”

“Eeeh—, I have a pretty strict curfew though.”

Get invited, refuse for now. This was a loner’s act of preserving equilibrium and also a loner’s instinct to be evasive. I mean, see, if I answered “I’ll go” and it turned out that it was just lip service on their side, wouldn’t you feel apologetic if it turned into something like a middle school reunion where they’d have a bitter laugh and answer “ah, so you’re going…”? Responding to that consideration with your own form of consideration was what they called the courtesy of an adult.

But it looked like Yuigahama didn’t say it as a form of lip service and needing to confirm the validity of my words, she spoke to Komachi.

“Is that true, Komachi-chan?”

“Not at all? We don’t have something like that at home though?”

Komachi shook her head to the question she was asked. Well, our household had a hands-off policy after all. Then again, both of our parents were busy so they wouldn’t be home around this time anyway.

When Komachi answered, a small sigh could be heard.

“Making up a lie that would immediately be exposed in front of your little sister, I’m not sure if you’re simplistic, brave, or something else… To be invited by people happens very rarely for you, so why don’t you gratefully take up the offer?”

Yukinoshita stated with a mix of astonishment, but who in their right mind would go after being told that…? Just how bad were you at inviting others?

“Well, I mean, we have a cat and all. I need to get back and take care of him.”

A poor invitation should be given a poor rejection.

When I answered, Yukinoshita abruptly went still. She then hesitated for just a speck of a moment.

A cat’s “meooow” voice could be heard. It either came from the corner of my brain, or possibly Yukinoshita’s.

And then, Yukinoshita nodded her head.

“I see. If it’s for your cat, then there’s nothing we can do.”

“She’s convinced!? I-If you’re talking about your cat, then he should be okay! L-Like, you know how they say pets resemble their owners and stuff, so he should be okay by himself!”

“Hey, that’s one word too much.”

She most certainly wasn’t wrong though since Komachi and I had the character traits of wanting to be left alone than being perfectly fine by ourselves, but it sounded more like she was saying we were completely unfit for society or failure as human beings.

But even if I brought it up, Yuigahama wouldn’t listen at all. If anything, she would look at me with murky eyes while pulling at Yukinoshita’s sleeve.

“C’mooon, let’s just hang out a bit mooore! I mean, everyone’s going too.”

“Just when did you decide everyone was going…? Hey, does that include me too?”

Yukinoshita raised an objection to the plans that were arbitrarily made and Yuigahama puffed her chest out as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

“Duh!”

When Yuigahama asserted strongly, Yukinoshita blinked and slowly averted her face.

“I-I see…”

Yuigahama peered into Yukinoshita’s face worriedly, seemingly confused at Yukinoshita’s reaction, having responded in a small, fragmented voice.

“…Maybe, you don’t want to?”

“No… It was just, a little surprising.”

Yukinoshita gently lifted her head and slightly shook her head. Her smooth, charming black hair fluttered lightly, hiding her cheeks that were flushed red.

However, to Yuigahama who was directly in front of her, it probably didn't hide anything. As if Yuigahama was charmed by Yukinoshita's behavior, she let out a slight breath.

…Aah, this was totally Yukinoshita-san giving in. The girlish, lover scenery was so bright that I wasn't sure how many colored mosaics there were.

And then, the yuri-yuri atmosphere flew into A Single Yuri[4].

"Then, then, that means Yukino-san's OK to go, right!? If so, that gets a lot of Komachi points!"

In contrast to Komachi who asked her with vigor, Yukinoshita replied with a calm tone.

"Yes. When it comes to Yuigahama-san, there's no telling how fussy she'd be if I refused. I'll be accompanying you."

"Yay! Hikki too, let's hang out!"

Having gained the ally called Yukinoshita, Yuigahama exploded with energy.

Furthermore, reinfrocements came from an unexpected source.

"That's right, Hachiman. Prepare your resolve! If Hachiman goooooes, I tooooo shall go!!"

"You like me way too much…"

I was subjected to Zaimokuza's irritating love call. Like, recently he's been acting so chummy with me that it's scary. That is, the fact that I just might end up acknowledging his existence.

But I, too, was a man. I had my pride. I had my dignity. I had my beliefs.

Taking back the words I had already said was something I couldn't do. To a man, there were no second words. If it's something I didn't want to do, then I wouldn't do it. Even during the times where I said I'd do it, depending on what it was, I wouldn't do it either.

It'd be a problem if they overestimated me. If it's to make my life easier, then I would pull all the stops to make it happen. Therefore, I will at least try to make my case to Yuigahama.

"Look here, Yuigahama. In the first place, what exactly are we supposed to do when you say 'hang out'? If you don't live your life with goals in mind, your life will end before you know it. Are you okay with that?"

"He started lecturing for some reason…"

Yuigahama looked a bit sulky, but I'd prefer it that you be glad that a punch wasn't added in the lecture. But once I saw her fed up expression, it looked like I was able to confuse her.

Just when I thought I was in the clear, Yukinoshita placed her hand on her chin and lightly tilted her head.

"…But that's certainly true. Now that you mention it, the words "hang out" don't specifically refer to anything."

Yukinoshita's murmur meant for herself was heard by Komachi who erected her index finger, looked up at the empty sky, and thought.

"Mmm, when you say 'hang out', I think of like hide and seek and tag. And then, if it's innocent, the Komachi points…"

"Points this, points that, shut your trap already. Are you the clerk manning a register at a convenience store or something? I didn't bring a card with me, damn it."

As they told you that, you'd start feeling guilty because you didn't bring a card with you. Not to mention, even if you said "ah, no thanks" as a final closing remark, they'd ask "should I create a card for you?" very nicely to you in which you'd respond with "ah, no thanks". What the heck was the "ah" about? Was there some sort of rule where you had to include English words at the beginning of your sentences or something?

And as I was submerged in useless thoughts like that,

"There's also color tag, freeze tag, king of the hill tag… Um, others are…"

Totsuka tried his best as he folded his fingers while blurting out whatever came to mind. It looked like he was trying to derive the answer to the question "what exactly does it mean to hang out?" by bringing up examples. By identifying a commonality of the brought up examples, you would derive the truth. It was truly a wonderful method. The way his mouth would open as he thought was truly innocent and wonderful. That's why I decided to lend him a hand.

"There're also cops and robbers and robbers and cops."

"Aren't those two the same thing?"

The moment I said something, Yuigahama opened her mouth and asked curiously. What's with her? Why was she stupidly opening her mouth like that for? Close it or I'll throw some trash in there.

When I scrutinized her with my rotten eyes, Yukinoshita patted Yuigahama's shoulders.

"Yuigahama-san. Hikigaya-kun doesn't have much experience going out to have fun, so there isn't much of a variation for him. Please be understanding."

Upon realizing after being told, Yuigahama said sorry looking apologetic.

"Ah, I-I see… Sorry."

"Stop being so serious when you're apologizing. I was this close to actually having to confrot my past, darn it."

Also, Yukinoshita, it may have looked like you were trying to change the mood in consideration of me, but that wasn't the case at all, okay? Why were you making that sweet smile while saying that, huh?

"But onii-chan, you didn't go out all that much, right?"

"Shaddup, I'm a boy of today. I'm living for the future!"

Jumping into the conversation at the earliest opportunity, Komachi nonchalantly brought up the things regarding my rosy handsome youth. Well, it was more like wicked eye than rosy.

And then, Yukinoshita made an enthusiastic, cheerful kind of smile and spoke sounding convinced.

"Participating in outdoor physical activities isn't something you can do unless you're with someone else. Aah, so that's why you're called Hikki. That name indicates how in shape you are. It's rather accurate."

How sweet. It was as sweet as MAX COFFEE. What the heck, that's like super sweet. Well, if it's that sweet, then I could settle for Saizeriya's gelato. Then again, what the heck was happening to MAX COFFEE if it was sweeter than actual sweets?

"Ha, don't look down on loners. We can easily engage in physical activities alone."

"Yep, yep, onii-chan would always box with the wires of the lights or use socks to shoot three pointers into the laundry basket right!"

Excuse me? Komachi-chan? Why would you expose that? Look, Yukinoshita-san was starting to look sad now, you know?

"So you're doing it in the progressive tense, huh…? Are you an idiot…?"

"When I get into it, it starts getting fun, so what can I do?"

In fact, it gradually became more fun and fun. My most recent interest was pitching socks. When I imagined the situation where I would pitch in the ninth inning of the game as the closer, magnificently holding down the other team, it's very fun. By the way, the finishing pitch was a knuckle ball.

Just when I figured I'd give them a detailed explanation, after imagining what kind of reactions they'd give afterwards, I decided against it. Even my one and only little sister, Komachi, didn't look like she would bother paying attention to me and moved the conversation along.

"Okay, so let's just say what we do from here will end up becoming fun… Onii-chan, let's go!"

"Eeeeh…"

It felt like I was cunningly pulled along somehow. Though I was still reluctant, Totsuka tip toed next to me.

“Um, I was thinking of going too… I’ll be really happy if Hachiman goes too.”

“So, where are we going? What should we do? Let’s play as hard as we can without breaking the law!”

What the heck! You should’ve said so earlier! It’s getting really fun all of a sudden now!

“Fumuu. The quickness of that change. Truly a super rapid transformation… It’s hopelessly cool!”

As I was roaring to go, Zaimokuza shot me a thumbs-up. I was close to doing it myself as well, but thanks to seeing Zaimokuza’s appearance, I managed to stop myself. Thanks, Zaimokuza.

“That kind of bugs me… Anyway, I guess we’re set then!”

At first, after watching the exchange that occurred between Totsuka and me, Yuigahama didn’t have a completely satisfied expression, but after a nod, she cheerfully clapped her hands.

On the other hand, Yukinoshita went “hm” and tilted her head.

“But what exactly are we supposed to when we ‘hang out’? Playing hide and seek at our age really is questionable…”

“It’s not that complicated… The normalfags are always playing house in class after all.”

In fact, there were those who played house where they would engage in exchanges that had expectations of the roles that were decided for every individual. If they were interacting unaware of anything, then the person was probably happy, but those who became conscious of the template conversations and everyday life were pitiful. That’s because they had to hold on to the awareness of that fact for their entire life. While only those who became aware of that feeling could sympathize with each other, it was that fact itself that didn’t allow them to coexist with each other.

In the same way, Yukinoshita likely understood this as well and made a sudden chuckle.

“Oh, it’s a bit unusual to hear that coming from you. As you’d expect from the man who’s always playing hide and seek in class, you see things differently.”

“Pretty much. I’ve been super good at it since a long time ago, hide and seek that is. Even in elementary school, whenever I was hiding, everyone ended up going home at some point.”

“What a sad skill…”

Yukinoshita placed her hand on her temple and let out an astounded sigh. See, look, there’s no way we could coexist. But Yuigahama was something else.

“But Hikki, it’s not like you’re hidden at all or anything in class. Rather, your bad eyes totally stand out.”

“Everyone’s totally a demon around here, really…”

Those given the role of demon wouldn’t ever look for me… Hachiman, you knew, didn’t you? That everyone in class 2-F were all chummy with each other! Except for you.

“I-It’s okay, Hachiman. This time I’m here. Anyway, let’s decide where to go. Okay?”

Hachiman, spoootted! So claimed the angel, but, ah, ah, totally got that wrong. Totsuka said it. He was just too pure hearted that I was close to ascending to Nirvana…

“Fumu, if there is not anything that comes to mind, then the arcade may suffice. It is one of my super recommended recommendations.”

While I was dumbfounded, it felt like someone with a particularly loud voice was saying something, but like Totsuka said, we had better decide where to go.

“So, what should we do?”

“Ha! The arcade! There was that too! Here! Komachi agrees with the arcade!”

When I asked again, Komachi who was thinking of something shot her hand up as if she had come up with something.

“That might be good, it’s pretty close to here too. I went last time with Hachiman, but we didn’t get to play that many games.”

“Alright, if Totsuka says so, then the arcade it is. Objections won’t be accepted.”

I agreed with Totsuka who agreed with Komachi. Yukinoshita and Yuigahama didn’t particularly have any objections as they nodded their heads.

“Huuuh~? That’s weird though~? Didn’t I say that just now~?”

Only one person in the back moaned, but as we pushed him going “yeah, yeah”, we began moving to the nearby arcade.

Alright, the arcade with Totsuka! It’d be nice if we could get a two-shot photo together!

× × ×

The arcade.

To high school students, it’s a space they were familiar with. Due to the large racket inside, the voices of the merry-go-lucky couples and group of friends wouldn’t bother you. By being able to be one with crowd, you could feel isolated, allowing you to keep your heart at peace. It was because of that noisiness that anyone could become a part of the space, where even guys like me could feel at ease.

“What a noisy place… What exactly are we supposed to do here?”

Yukinoshita looked around restlessly as if she wasn’t familiar with being here. As I recall, the arcade at the place we went to last time, Lalaport[5], was geared more towards families, with a lighter emphasis on amusement than pop, so coming to an arcade like this submerged in explosive sounds and smoke was probably her first time.

“For the time being, let’s take a look around.”

There wasn’t any point if we just stood around at the arcade. I suggested to the others and we decided to walk around the area for the time being. When we made our leisurely rounds, Yuigahama noticed something and pointed at it.

“Ah, that looks kind of fun.”

“Oh, that might be nice!”

I looked at what Komachi and Yuigahama were pointing at and,

“Fumu, Mahjong Fight Club[6], huh?”

“Huh, through online play, you can compete throughout the country.”

In the games nowadays, you primarily did everything online. It’d be nice if they could be more considerate of those who were friendless and wanted to collect things or those who ran away to the forest and still didn’t have a place to go.

“What should we do? Komachi-chan, do you want to try playing Mahjong?”

“Let’s do it! In the national tournament mode, I’ll play with Yui-san!”

“Don’t play. You guys seem like you’d be super strong too, so stop it.”

Also, Yukinoshita’s older sister, Haruno-san, seemed like she’d be loved by the tiles[7] while Kawasomething-san seemed like she’d be absurdly strong in dealing her tiles. It’s like everyone was really strong or something…

Ignorant of my thoughts on the matter, Yukinoshita gazed at the Mahjong game cabinet from afar and muttered.

“Is Mahjong something women play? It doesn’t really give off that kind of image.”

“I guess so. It does feel like something guys would play. It’s manly that it’s kind of cool…”

Just as Totsuka said, seeing guys playing Mahjong was probably easier to imagine. So something like the nights of field trips, you’d see set up tables in the boys’ rooms.

Similarly, I would play Mahjong as well for the most part. Or so I say, but I only knew at best the scoring hands and if I had to calculate the points, then I wasn’t really sure how that worked and to top that off, there wasn’t anyone who would play with me. But since the CPU existed, then that wasn’t a problem at all.

Oh, it looked like my gaze had found its way over towards a cabinet I was very intimate with. That gaze was dutifully spotted by Komachi who made a cat-like smile.

“Ah, the Mahjong game that onii-chan usually plays was that one, right? The one where clothes are taken off when you win.”

“Hey, idiot, stop. Don’t blurt that out in a place like this. Totsuka might hear, damn it!”

Don’t go spreading negative assessments of your onii-chan playing morbid-like games, okay?

With this, Totsuka would end up hating me and with slightly red cheeks, he’d go “I-I guess you can’t help it, huh? H-Hachiman’s a guy and all…” What the heck was I supposed to do if he said that with a blushing face? I’d either feel like dying, or possibly, end up having my eyes opened to the vulgar ecstasy of imagining a cute girl who believed in cabbage fields and Oriental storks being thrown into an uncensored porno[8].

But luck was on my side as Totsuka didn’t seem to have overheard. After feeling slightly relieved, Yukinoshita’s icy voice pierced me from behind as if freezing water was poured on my back.

“…Be a little considerate of us too.”

She was either angry or disgusted as she sent a glancing glare at me. You’re scary. Because she was scary, I averted my gaze from Yukinoshita and what I saw instead was Yuigahama motioning her hands to come over.

“Ah, but look, look. It looks like something women would play too, see… And, huh…?”

Pulled by Yuigahama, I looked in her direction as well and a familiar looking back emanating with grief was there.

“Oh, I’m getting good tiles today. I sure am loved by the Mahjong tiles. Juuust why don’t guys love me, huuuh? Oh, that’s Pon, Kan, Shin[9], just kidding, hahaha, haaa…”

The smoke that escaped along with her deep sigh was covering her face, but there was no mistake about that appearance.

“It’s. Hira. Tsuka. Sensei…”

Yuigahama shuddered as she uttered the name in a way to ascertain it.

It looked like when Hiratsuka-sensei ran away from us earlier and was at a lost as to where to go, she arrived at this arcade, playing Mahjong while sulking. Zaimokuza placed his hand on his chest and straightened his clothes as if he was mourning while Totsuka averted his eyes away in sorrow.

Contrary to the lively space, it was turning to an atmosphere abundant with sadness.

Uuugh, I really don't want to talk to her.

As I worried about whether to just ignore her or call out to her, Yukinoshita pushed me from behind.

"Look, that's your homeroom teacher, right?"

"Don't push me. Also, stop trying to force me to do it, okay?"

Just when was that decided, huh? Once you started taking care of, she's likely to ramble on and on, so I really didn't want to do that, you know?

While having that exchange, I could hear some sort of mumbling from behind me.

"A single, heartbroken female teacher… Hah! That could work! As far as Komachi's concerned, that's a possibility! It's better to have more candidates anyway…"

When I turned around, Komachi was calculating something as she bent her fingers. And once she arrived at a conclusion, she shot her hands up and walked forward.

"Leave this to Komachi!"

The instant she said that, Komachi dashed towards Hiratsuka-sensei.

"She ran off with a huge smile on her face."

Just like Yukinoshita said, Komachi had a "nehehe" kind of grin on her face. That was a rather familiar looking smile.

"Nothing good ever happens when she has that kind of smile…"

"Aah, I kind of get that…"

Yuigahama made a wry smile. I'm sorry that my little sister was always such a bother.

"Right…? Well, that's what makes her cutely cute though."

"There he goes, siscon…"

Yuigahama said so in shock. But that's wrong. It's not that I was being a siscon, I was just showing my love for her.

And that beloved little sister of mine snuck up behind Hiratsuka-sensei and put all she could into making her voice energetic when she called out to her.

"Seeeensei♪."

"Mm? W-Whoa, Hikigaya's little sister… W-What's the matter?"

Hiratsuka-sensei threw herself back nosily rattling the stool since she thought no one would call out to her. The lines of her prettily arced back made me imagine her slender spine. This was completely irrelevant, but her bent back was very erotic.

For the brother that knew nothing beside his little sister in his heart, the opposite being true just as well, Komachi rapidly spoke to Hiratsuka-sensei with her hand drawing close to her.

“No, no, that’s the thing. By coincidence, Komachi and the others came here to play, so by all means please come with us or something, or rather, my brother needs someone to watch over him or something.”

“Fu, Fumu. I-Is that so…? Then shall l take you up on your offer?”

Hiratsuka-sensei gave her consent, getting pulled along by Komachi. Yukinoshita who watched their exchange from afar let out a small sigh.

“It looks like they’re done talking.”

“Okay, starting from the top, let’s all go and have some fun!”

When she said that, Yuigahama ran to where Hiratsuka-sensei and Komachi were. Following her was Totsuka who jogged over while Zaimokuza advanced forward in loud steps. Both Yukinoshita and I who were left behind looked at each other, let out a brief sigh, and obediently went along.

× × ×

We took an unplanned look around the arcade.

The display with a high brightness in the dim interior was vivid to the eyes and the loud BGM entangled with character voices would sometimes reach my ears.

And amongst the noise was a remarkably resounding fanfare.

“Oh, how about this!? Experience Horse Racing, Shining Star Horse10!”

And then Zaimokuza undauntedly screamed out. It might have been because of that shriek too that I spoke with a cringing voice.

“Horse racing game, huh…?”

“Oh, you don’t seem interested. Useless men are supposedly fond of gambling though?”

Hiratsuka-sensei said so in surprise.

“I already decided that I wouldn’t gamble. Also, I’m not a useless man…”

My grades were good normally and even my in-class behavior was quiet and diligent, you know? Well, it’s not like I had anyone to talk to in class anyway. Because of that, English group discussions were totally bad. What’s bad? The people who sat next to me would go straight to fiddling with their cellphones without question; it was that bad. I mean, they could confirm with me first! At least say something like “it’s not like we need to do anything, right?” No, that’s bad too. Saying only bad made it sound like my Japanese was worse off than my English.

I was starting to feel more like a useless human being than a useless man. Apparently, I wasn’t the only one who thought that because Yukinoshita made an abrupt smile as if making a fool out of me.

“In your case, the way you live your life is a gamble. The odds are quite high.”

“Don’t turn a person’s life into low percentages. Being a full-time house husband is super stable.”

“That’s a super gamble…”

Yuigahama uttered an honest impression with a shivering expression.

That’s not it, really… It’s just I haven’t met my destined one yet…

Yeah, I wasn’t at fault. Destiny was.

“In that case, how about something like that then?”

Huh? Was it my destined person? Or so I thought, but it was Totsuka. What Totsuka was pointing at was a medal game cabinet. Um, the one where you insert a medal ball and it drops down. It wasn’t like those medal games where a medal would come out if you won at rock-paper-scissors, but like those games where medal drop down called Pusher or something.

It’s a rather intuitive game so there shouldn’t be too many issues with figuring out how to play it. It’s also something couples play quite often.

To put it the other way around, it was also a game that was light in the needs of the customers.

For that reason, Zaimokuza made a “kepukon” cough and triumphantly opened his mouth.

“Fumu. A medal game, huh? Too naïve, too naïve! Someone of my caliber would not find enjoyment in the musings of children like this!”

“So in other words, it’s a game where you insert a medal and the stored medals drop. A rather simple game, isn’t it?”

The way Yukinoshita spoke sounded like she was interested, seemingly having an image of the game being played by children.

“Now, now, everyone should at least give it a try. While it may be simple, it can surprisingly get you addicted.”

Listening to those two, Hiratsuka-sensei made a bitter smile and said so to mediate.

Well, something like this was something you had to try once.

× × ×

The interior of the store was enveloped by a lightly played BGM track and as if drowning that out were the explosive sounds coming from the cabinets. I could hear from afar the merry voices of the young people.

And in front of me was the sounding of medals trickling down coming from the medal game cabinets.

The noisy sounds could be heard from all around me, but comparatively, you were given the impression that it was rather quiet in comparison which may have been because no one had opened their mouth.

“……”

“……”

The talkative Zaimokuza and also Yukinoshita were dead silent when I noticed. Despite that, their eyes continued to move, their fingers already poised for the timing to insert the medals.

“Ah, aah, so close. Grrr~, why didn’t they drop just noooow?”

“Yuigahama-san, quiet.”

Um, you’re being way too serious, you know… Yuigahama looked a little awkward so didn’t you feel sorry for her?

And then, there was another pitiful person.

“…Fumu. Don’t look down on the power of the wicked eye… I see it! Ah, aaafun… It missed… Ngh, an afterimage, huh…?”

“You couldn’t see a damn thing…”

It was more like his head was pitiful in this case. Didn’t you just claim that this was just musings of children? You’re totally having a blast right now.

But Zaimokuza wasn’t the only one who was having fun.

“…Tch, to think I’d let the jackpot slip by, what a blunder on my part…”

It looked like Yukinoshita was the type to be rather enthusiastic once she was involved in a game because this time as well, she was making a fist with a fiery concentration that seemed capable of anything. In fact, it looked like she caught on to the game really fast because medals were just spilling out too…

“E-Everyone’s pretty into it, huh…? Yukinoshita-san remembered the rules at some point too.”

“Somehow the mood’s gotten really bloodthirsty…”

Totsuka and Komachi who were playing wholesomely stopped their hands temporarily and backed away as they were watching. But Yukinoshita and Yuigahama were engrossed in the game and continued without noticing.

“Ah, Yukinon, I’m going to borrow a medal, okay~?”

The hand that Yuigahama stretched out was grabbed by Yukinoshita.

“Wait just a moment. Do you have a plan to get them back? For a while now, you’ve been just inserting the medals without thinking about anything.”

“Uu…”

When Yukinoshita pointed it out, Yuigahama froze. Certainly, she was spending the medals like water for a while now. She was the type that shouldn't be allowed to gamble. As if having the same opinion, Yukinoshita raised her index finger and lectured Yuigahama in earnest.

"In the first place, Yuigahama-san, your ability to think about the future is rather lacking since a long time ago…"

"Uuuu…"

One word and Yuigahama's body shrunk back. Since Yukinoshita had a sound argument, no one could really help her out here.

"Komachi, gimme a medal."

"Not even looking like he wants to borrow them, that's my onii-chan…"

Komachi's expression became a look of realization instead of a look of astonishment. What? It's not like I was going to give them back anyway, so the expression "I'll take them" was more correct. I was just being honest.

As I was attempting to send a sibling-only non-verbal communicative method through a stare to Komachi, a voice called out to me from a cabinet nearby.

"Hikigaya, would you like to use these?"

Hiratsuka-sensei held out medals that bounced off each other. "Waaaai, lucky!" Just as I was about to extend out my hands, Komachi slapped them.

Oh, c'mon, Hiratsuka-sensei said it was okay…. When I looked at her in discontent, Komachi raised her finger going "no!"

She then turned to Hiratsuka-sensei.

"Aah, could you not spoil my brother too much? You'll only make him a useless man even faster. If he becomes financially dependent in the future, the ones who will suffer will be Komachi and also his wife. As far as Komachi is concerned, I want my brother to have a respectable happy life."

"I-I see…… W-What a deep thing to say for a middle school student…"

You got that right, what a deep thing to say for a middle school student. How the heck did you become so amazing? Was there a useless person in the family or something? By all means, please thank the bad model of a teacher.

× × ×

Whether it was because we didn't have all that much at the beginning or that our earnings were shared between everyone, we went empty on medals surprisingly quickly.

"Now then, what should we do next?" With nothing to do, Komachi was trying to decide and opened her mouth after looking at everyone.

"Okay, we're all out of medals and we're also low on time, so let's move on to the last game."

“Last game? What are you planning to do?”

We were still going to do something more? I totally thought we were going to go straight home. Komachi took the stares that wondered what exactly we were going to do and she declared in a bodacious voice.

“All-About Chiba Prefecture Ultra Quiz~!”

While everyone else had a dumbfounded face, only Komachi herself turned towards the cabinet behind her as she added “bam, bam, puff, puff”.

“So with that being said, we’ll be holding a contest that tests your knowledge of Chiba with this game here, QUIZ MAGIC CHIBADEMY11.”

“QUIZ MAGIC CHIBADEMY, it’s time to get started~!”

Suddenly a clone of the quiz games I usually played appeared… Were there other places beside Chiba that requested for this? In fact, it was already suspicious enough that Chiba did.

When Komachi inserted her coins into the machine, the machine made “br-r-r-ring” noises and looked like it was going to start up. It seemingly had already decided on what we were going to do, not requiring any input.

“Now then, sensei. Please be the quizzer and the judge.”

“Umu, very well.”

Hiratsuka-sensei gladly took up the request from Komachi.

She started up the QUIZ MAGIC CHIBADEMY and steadily filled up the system screen, but there was a problem.

“But this is one of those games, isn’t it? Fundamentally, it’s a game you play by yourself, right? Designed just for me, right?”

When I asked, Komachi went “fufuun” as she laughed.

“That’s why we’ll be competing in teams. We’ll break up into teams and answer as we see fit. The rules are… Well, like, please read the mood as we go along.”

“Komachi-san’s explanation suddenly gotten lazy, didn’t it…?”

Yukinoshita spoke while placing her hands on her temple. Seriously. Read the mood as we go along, what the heck was that? Japan’s common day to day life?

Well, there only being two cabinets, all we could do was just form teams, make some mental compromises, and go at it.

“How should we split up the teams?”

When Totsuka asked while fidgeting, Yuigahama slowly raised her hand, her hesitation making her look suspicious.

“Ah, if it’s a team battle, then I’ll go with Hi-Hikki… Um, for his Chiba knowledge…”

Well, a reasonable choice. When it came to knowing about Chiba, I was by far the most knowledgeable. The team I was placed in was pretty much set to win… As long we didn't try to coordinate with each other, we should be okay.

Komachi shook her with a "no, no", riding between being aware of what she was planning and not.

"Let's break up the teams into boys and girls."

Fumu, that made a lot of sense. So that meant my team would consist of myself, Zaimokuza, and… Totsuka? It's okay for Totsuka to be in this team, right?

I was close to being absorbed in serious thought out of habit, but once I caught a glimpse of Totsuka's cheerful smile, I stopped caring.

"We're on the same team then, huh, Hachiman?"

"Yeah, let's give it our all, Totsuka."

Alright, let's try our best!

On one hand, I was overflowing with motivation and on the other was an audible, depressed voice coming from the corner of my vision.

"Eh? Eeeeh…"

Komachi snuck up to the discontent Yuigahama.

"Yui-san, I have something in mind."

"T-There it is~. That planning, scary kind of smile…"

Komachi abruptly distanced herself from Yuigahama and turned in our direction. All the while making a suspicious smile at the start.

"Fufufu… Now, let us begin! The losing team will be subjected to a penalty game!"

With a typical, poppy Komachi-like smile at the end, she proclaimed the start of the game.

× × ×

In the contest flowing with a unique feeling of tension, Hiratsuka-sensei stood at the front of the two cabinets. With both teams betting their pride and the penalty game on the All-About Chiba QUIZ MAGIC CHIBADEMY, the match was lit at this very moment.

And with my love for Chiba, I couldn't be losing so easily.

Hiratsuka-sensei looked at us and let out a big breath. She then raised her voice.

"Do you want to go to the Kingdom of Ostriches[12]!?"

"Yeeaaah!"

"Yeaaaah!"

“Yeaah!”

Komachi, Totsuka, and also Zaimokuza raised their hands overhead in excitement. On the other hand, feeling left behind, Yukinoshita and Yuigahama tilted their heads.

“What’s the Kingdom of Ostriches…?”

“Totally sounds like a place I wouldn’t want to go to…”

What, did these two not know about the Kingdom of Ostriches…?

“It’s pretty fun if you go. Ostrich sashimi’s really delicious.”

“So you can eat ostriches…”

Yuigahama was surprised with a look of disgust, but ostrich was known to have high protein and low calories. The light quality of the meat was quite delicious. The eggs had a rather rough taste.

As I thought over the matters relating to ostriches, the game had started without my knowledge. I could hear Hiratsuka-sensei’s voice reading the questions aloud.

“Question. Speaking of Chiba’s mascot,”

Before she was able to finish reading the question, on the same team was Zaimokuza who pressed the buzzer.

“Fumu, leave this to me.”

When Zaimokuza spoke brimming with confidence, he fluttered his coat, straightened it, and pointed at Hiratsuka-sensei.

“The rampaging red mad dog, CHI-BA+KUN[13]!”

What’s with that nickname…?

And then, along with Hiratsuka-sensei’s shaking head was the buzzing “too bad” SE. It looked like she was still in the middle of her question and she continued reading.

“CHI-BA+KUN, that is…”

“Nng, a trap!”

Zaimokuza hit the buzzer in frustration. Yeah right, it was just common sense, not a trap. In quizzes, there were key points to the questions. That’s what they said in Nanamaru Sanbatsu[14].

“Zaimokuza, you…”

When I glared at him, Zaimokuza stuck out his tongue and bonked his head.

“Tehe pero ☆”

“Tch, you really piss me off…”

When I transmitted my murderous intent to Zaimokuza, Hiratsuka-sensei, disgruntled from our exchange, tried to continue on.

"I'm reading the rest of the question. Speaking of Chiba's mascot, the mascot CHI-BA+KUN, that is, what is that CHI-BA+KUN's color?"

This time, the key point of the problem was read. And this was where I would press the button. But I was unable to cover the distance to touch the buzzer and Komachi took the right to answer.

"All mine! The answer is red~!"

When she answered correctly, the lights glittered. Komachi was dancing with twirls and spins under those lights. Well, that was a simple question that was way too easy so… Let's just think of it as a warmup.

When Komachi and Yuigahama went "yaaay!" with a high five, Yukinoshita muttered curiously.

"…Why is CHI-BA+KUN red, I wonder?"

"W-Who knows… Even I don't know that much…"

I wonder why, huh? I was sure there wasn't anything associated with red in Chiba though… Surely the reason wasn't because people's bodies radiated colors of red from overflowing motivation…

Indulged in my own thoughts, Hiratsuka-sensei spoke up.

"Do you mind if I move on to the next question? Question. Located in Chiba, the very first manmade beach in Japan is!?"

Oh, now this was a rather difficult one. No one could reach out to the buzzer. But at that moment, Totsuka reached out to the buzzer with a contemplating face.

"U-Um… Ku-Kujuuukuri Beach?"

And then the incorrect answer buzzing SE sounded out.

Totsuka became depressed and clapped his hands together apologetically to me.

"Hachiman, sorry."

"Nice guts, my little firefighter-kun. We won't get anything like the correct answer if we don't speak up. It's all good, don't let it bug you, don't mind!"

I thought I could embrace at least one of his shoulders in the midst of the confusion but a shadow abruptly got in between us.

"Ha-Hachiman!? I-I as well! I tried my best too, you know!"

Why the hell was this guy using cute appeals with me lately? Were you expecting a Saint Bernard kind of demand or something? You sounded more like a tosa dog though.

"Yeah, yeah, I hear you. Leave the rest to me."

I quickly dealt with Zaimokuza and I turned towards the cabinet. To wipe away Totsuka's guilt from committing a mistake meant that I had to correctly answer this question.

I sharply eyed the buzzer and then pressed it with absolute confidence.

When the "ding, dong" SE went off, Hiratsuka-sensei made a grin.

"Fumu, Hikigaya. Your answer."

"The answer is… Inage Beach."

My throat resounded with a gulp. Or it could've been from someone else there. It was a brief and momentary silence.

And then there was the chiming of the "ding dong, ding dong, ding dong" sound as if to conspicuously applaud the winner for answering correctly.

"Hmph, when it comes to Chiba, that's about right."

Although I was elated with success, just what was with this super enthusiast question? Had it not been someone like me proudly full of love for Chiba, no one would've been able to answer it.

Hiratsuka-sensei nodded her head and raised both of her hands, with one finger standing up on each.

"With this, both teams are head to head. Alright, let's keep going!"

After Hiratsuka-sensei squeezed her hand into a fist, I found myself naturally getting into gear as well. I lightly placed my hand on the buzzer and readied myself for war.

"Question. Chiba's local specialty is?"

"Katsuura tantan-men!"

"Question. Bousou Local Pastries is?"

"Orandaya[15]!"

"Question. Although it's in Chiba?"

"Tokyo German Village[16]!"

"Question. A famous Chiba person is?"

"Inou Tadataka[17]!"

In no time, I shot out a stream of answers in speedy fashion. After the defeats from earlier, the stream of correct answers also got everyone excited.

"Hachiman, you're awesome!"

"Indeed. Hachiman, you are number one."

Totsuka clapped his hands and directed a smile at me while Zaimokuza triumphantly laughed and patted my shoulders. But it wasn't like I was the amazing one.

“Nah. I’m not number one. Chiba’s number one, that’s all. Chiba’s 3rd place in Kanto though.”

Following Tokyo and Kanagawa was the immovable third position, Chiba. You might as well consider it as the third of the entire country. Even the name Makuhari New City was like that, so Chiba might as well be called a capital.

As opposed to the boy team, frolicking with the belief that their win was assured, the girl team were low in spirits. Even Komachi was gritting her teeth in frustration.

“Kuh, that’s my onii-chan, his love for Chiba is deep…”

“At this rate, we’re going to lose to Hikki’s team…”

The words that Yuigahama slipped out caused Yukinoshita who seemingly wasn’t interested in the competition to twitch reactively.

“Lose… Lose to Hikigaya-kun…”

When she voiced that displeasure, she opened her eyes and lightly reached out to the buzzer, burning with a serene, fighting spirit.

“Yu-Yukinon’s on fire…”

Yuigahama shivered from Yukinoshita’s oppressive spirit. Hiratsuka-sensei who was fond of that kind of development made a grin and continued to read the next question.

“Question. At Chiba’s decanter souvenir shop, the well-known”

It’s mine! Even if Yukinoshita decided to take this game seriously, when it came to Chiba, it was my field, it was my garden; in fact, it was my house. I may lose on the semester exams, but I had no reason to lose here. With absolute confidence, I pressed the buzzer to give an immediate response.

“Wet rice crackers!”

The instant I answered, Hiratsuka-sensei smiled abruptly.

“Wet rice crackers… But,”

“Kuh, crap…”

I ended up tripping over my own feet out of reflex because of Yukinoshita’s influential ambition… Zaimokuza looked at me with an irritating expression going “hmph hmm”.

While breaking away from Zaimokuza’s stare, the question continued.

“What is the recommended way of eating these wet rice crackers!?”

“Who the heck would know that!?”

Yuigahama raised her voice in frustration going “grrr”, but there was someone who promptly hit the buzzer.

“Leave it to Komachi!”

Not good… I eat wet rice crackers with Komachi all the time so she’ll definitely get the right answer…

“The answer is… You toast it in an oven and eat it with shichimi and mayonnaise!”

When Komachi answered, Yuigahama’s face turned into a grimace and Yukinoshita made a frown.

“Sounds like a ton of calories…”

“Is it really okay to toast wet rice crackers…?”

It sure was, since they were delicious when toasted. Well, I probably couldn’t deny the calorie claim though.

And then came the ringing of the fanfare to the correct answer.

“It was even the right answer too…”

So said Yuigahama astonishingly, but you should at least give it a try as it’s rather good.

Feeling good after answering correctly, Komachi looked proud going “hmph”.

“When it comes to useless things regarding Chiba, please leave it to me. After all, I just end up remembering everything my brother says about Chiba since I’m the only one he can talk to!”

“Woow, weird siblings…”

Hey? Yuigahama-san? Weren’t you just being a little too upfront about your thoughts? It’s not a big deal, right? We’re getting along really well and all. Just when I thought I would object, Hiratsuka-sensei began to read the next question, not allowing me any room to do so.

“Question. The most hauled fish product throughout the country in the Chiba prefecture is?”

The instant the question was finished, the buzzer was pressed at lightning speed.

“Spiny lobster.”

Yukinoshita answered with a posed look. What the heck was that just now? Because there was absolutely no delay there…

“Why the heck does Yukinon know!? Yukinon’s a little weird too!”

Yuigahama exclaimed, but it wasn’t something to be surprised about. The question just read was in reasonable bounds of academic geography and if you considered Yukinoshita’s father’s work, she probably knew a few things about Chiba.

That being said, that wasn't something you'd know normally. Even Totsuka was impressed as he spoke.

"We're in Chiba yet we can still catch spiny lobster. Hauled the most in the country too…"

"Right? We might as well change Chiba to Chiba Lobster instead."

It's called spiny lobster, yet Ise[18] wasn't holding the number one position. What's that about? Was it similar to how Tokyo German village was in Chiba or something? I see, that made sense.

In any case, from the topic just now, it made it clear to me again how high Yukinoshita's mysterious specs were.

"But still, not a big surprise at all. Yukipedia-san."

"Could you stop calling me that?"

Yukinoshita brushed her hair resting against her shoulders away and stared at me with a piercing, cold look. Komachi tried to use that anger to her advantage.

"That's right, onii-chan. You need to make sure to call her by Yukino."

"Wha, that's… I'm not doing that…… My life would be in danger if I did."

It was scary so I said those last few words in a small voice. Because of my fear, my stare shifted away and as if responding to that, Yukinoshita gently averted her face.

"T-That's right…… Even if you called me that, I'm not sure what I'd do."

"Aaah, are you guys done?"

Yukinoshita's words were drowned out by Hiratsuka-sensei's sighing voice, so I wasn't able to hear what she had said all the way to the end.

Hiratsuka-sensei cleared her throat with a cough and made a club holding gesture.

"…The last question is a Hammer Chance!"

"Chance!"

For reasons unknown, Zaimokuza reacted to just that single word alone.

Completely ignoring that, Hiratsuka-sensei began to explain.

"For this last question, if you answer correctly using this Golden Hammer, you'll earn 10,000 points."

"Then what the heck was the point of the entire quiz then…? Now I look like an idiot for answering all those questions earlier. What's this, epitome of life?"

You could pile up things one by one gradually, but that didn't always mean you would succeed. Things like connections, relations, the whims of the big-wigs

and estimates from the top were enough to overturn everything, turning everything to nothing.

Once again, I was enlightened to another truth of the world…

But it's exactly because of that that I couldn't lose. When it came to winning for my luxury, regardless of how scummy and crappy the rules were, the twisted laws that allowed anyone else except me to have a taste of that sweet nectar was something I would stand against.

As if we were kindred spirits, Zaimokuza faced me and clenched his fist.

"Hachiman, I will leave this to you. Use it, the Goldion Hammer!"

"R-Right… It's Golden Hammer by the way."

Was this really okay? Was this a good idea? Well, the so called "as long the problem didn't become one, it wouldn't become one" aspect existed too. Right now, that wasn't the problem.

It was finally the last question. This long lasting battle would be at its end with this one question. Then again, this battle was going to end from just this question alone though? Was that really okay?

"Question. I asked 100 high school girls from Chiba. What is the standard dating spot?"

I waited patiently for the key points of the question and cautiously pressed the button.

There was no issue with my timing in pressing the buzzer. I flawlessly took the first step before everyone else. The phrase "victory goes to who strikes first" further solidified my victory.

What was left was to use as much of the allotted time as I could and derive the answer.

Purposely starting off with "from Chiba" meant that the living creatures called high school girls wouldn't differ all that much from region to region. This wasn't Pokemon, so it mostly certainly wasn't the case that their allocation would be different from habitat to habitat.

Furthermore, high school girls were living creatures sensitive to the latest fads, so on a whole, they were always trying to get in with the things that were mainstream. Therefore, the restricting condition of "from Chiba" didn't apply in this context.

In addition, the words "dating spot" made it obvious that the answers in this survey were just personal preferences given by the high school girls. So to speak, it wasn't difficult to imagine that this survey was simply a gathering of love worshipping high school girls.

If I were to say more, the condition of “female high school girls” could be said to include the naivety and youth, and flipping that around, their purity and admiration towards adults.

From those given conditions, the answer I could derive was…

I can see it! The ending! But saying it out loud was a little embarrassing…

“…B-Boyfriend’s house or something?”

Buzz buzz. The SE rung mercilessly.

And the room suddenly became quiet.

Everyone looked at each other and at Komachi’s side, they began to talk about something.

“He gave a surprisingly, honest answer…”

Yuigahama murmured wanting to run away.

Hiratsuka-sensei asked me with a considerate voice.

“…Hikigaya, is that what you’re hoping for?”

“Oddly enough, for how realistic that delusion is, it’s also sad.”

Yukinoshita purposely gave me the final blow at the very end. It depended on the explanation, but beheading was a form of kindness too!

“Kuh, super embarassing… Kill me! Just kill me!”

As I saw despair in the world, Totsuka and Zaimokuza followed after me.

“I-It’s okay Hachiman. You gave it some thought and if I were a girl, I’d be really happy!”

“That’s right, Hachiman. I think about it quite often. It is nothing to be ashamed about.”

“I-I know, right? We’re boys and all. It’s not weird at all!”

Totsuka was too much an angel that I would love to have him visit my house next time. But Zaimokuza’s delusion was creepy though!

Then again, being categorized with Zaimokuza made me think “yeah, I’m me” as my feelings sank away. There, Komachi with a grinning smile tapped on my shoulders.

“Now, now, what’s the problem? Komachi’s at the house anyway, so that just now was very high in Komachi points.”

“Don’t comfort me. Don’t give me that look of pity. Don’t pile up the points either. You’re just making me feel worse.”

Besides, if Komachi’s at home, then I was pretty much on the true route already. She’d be my girlfriend and we’d have dates at home every day. What the heck, what Chiba anime was that?

Having been put to shame, my life was already beyond zero, it was Requiem Zero. But there was also something else taken away from me.

“Since it was the wrong answer, the Golden Hammer will be handed to the other team.”

The Golden Hammer was ruthlessly taken by the other team and the Hunter Chance[19] was given to them. Well, common sense of the world dictated that missing your chance meant the end of you.

And then, the girl team had their attacking cha~nce[20].

“Yuigahama-san, it’s in your hands.”

“Yui-san, go for it!”

Yukinoshita who wasn’t particularly suited for the question left it to Yuigahama who had a better probability of answering it while Komachi clenched her fist and cheered Yuigahama on.

“O-Okay…”

With their feelings, Yuigahama nervously pressed the buzzer.

“Um… The answer is… Tokyo’s Destiny Land!”

And then, the SE indicating the correct answer went off as if praising the winners.

× × ×

In the arcade that returned to its liveliness, even being noisier, Komachi amusingly raised her voice.

“Time for the results~!”

No different from the very beginning, Komachi went “bam, bam, puff, puff” as she spoke, took a step forward, and gave way to Hiratsuka-sensei. After a single nod, Hiratsuka-sensei made a grin.

“The girl team wins with 10,003 points.”

“I’m not satisfied with this at all…”

But, well, complaining wouldn’t do me any good. No matter when or where, the world was cruel, even funny at times. The value of effort was inferior to the value of miracles.

That’s why the only thing the losers could do was praise the winners who managed to bring forth those miracles. That act alone allowed the winners, thanks to the losers, to justify the truth that resulted.

As we gave our round of applause, the girl team was overjoyed as they huddled together. They were probably deciding on the penalty game.

“Since we won because of Yui-san, Yui-san can ask for whatever she wants.”

“I suppose so. I believe that’s proper. I don’t have any complaints since we won and I don’t have anything in particular that I want to ask them for.”

When Komachi and Yukinoshita gave their decisive right away, Yuigahama got flustered. Well, it wasn’t very often she had to decide things for herself, so suddenly being pushed the role probably confused her.

“Eh, that’s so sudden though…”

Yuigaham groaned as she thought about various things and Komachi crept up to her.

“Yui-san, Yui-san. Can you lend me your ear?”

“Eh? What is it?”

Yuigahama faced Komachi and tilted her head.

“Whisper, whisper, whisper.”

“…Uh huh, uh huh, –eh, eeeh~, that’s kind of embarrassing…”

I didn’t know what Komachi was telling her, but Yuigahama turned red all the way to her ears. When they finished their talk and signaled, Hiratsuka-sensei turned towards us.

“Now then, it’s time to reveal the penalty game.”

After saying that, she glanced at Yuigahama and urged her on.

“Y-You see… Hikki.”

Her words then stopped abruptly. She took several deep breaths. She then controlled her breathing and looked at me with upturned eyes.

“…Let’s, go out and play again?”

It was a moderate, yet slight single step, no, possibly a half step. It was a distance that was testing the waters.

If I had given it a number then it undoubtedly would've been at most a few centimeters. In words, then it'd be somewhere between "playing" and "leeway".

This fragile feeling of distance acting as a buffer of the sort to guard against conflict and fatigue was suitable for how we were now. That's why I was able to minutely take the middle ground and respond accordingly.

"…Well, I guess I'll have to if that's the penalty."

Right, if that's the penalty, then I had no say in the matter.

The defeated had to bear their sins as well as accept their punishment. So accompanying her one more time like how we did now should be fine.

When I answered, Yuigahama's shoulders shook and she let out a sigh. She showed a smile as if a huge burden was taken off her shoulders and I found myself averting my eyes away in embarrassment as well.

Ahead of where I turned to was Komachi nodding her head up and down, somehow getting on my nerves.

What my little sister was thinking was clear as day, but that included her actual feelings on the matter so it was rather complicated being unable to get angry with her. As I scratched my head wondering what a situation to be in, coming from an unthinkable direction was a raised voice.

"Yeah, that might be nice! We should all hang out again!"

It was a soft tone that resembled an angel's bra[21] or even an angel's wing.

Komachi's face became dubious after the sudden audible voice.

"…Hm?"

When I turned around, Totsuka was coming up to me with a smiling face, completely indicating "I can't wait!" Reflexively, I ended up replying without spontaneously voicing things like "yeah!", "alright!", and "yes, yes!"

"Eh? To-Totsuka-san? As far as Komachi's concerned, that didn't mean everyone but…"

Komachi attempted to get in between me and Totsuka in a panic, only to be obstructed by a large looming shadow.

"Fumu. I shall accompany you as well. A-Although I did say accompany, I just meant accompanying you as in hanging out, okay! D-Don't misunderstand! Hachiman!"

"I won't. There isn't a single thing in what you said for that to ever happen."

Again, what kind of appeal was that, damn Zaimokuza…? When I felt disgusted, that disgust seemed to have infected Yuigahama who smiled with a "fufu".

"It's like… Not what I was expecting, but since it's fun, whatever."

After she said that and turned around, Yuigahama smiled at Yukinoshita. Yukinoshita who understood the meaning behind the smile let out a small sigh and nodded lightly.

“I suppose. I’m not particularly too good when it comes to everyone, but if you’re okay with me, I’ll accompany you when I have the time.”

Yuigahama who took her kind gaze flew at Yukinoshita.

“Okay, it’s a promise. Yukinon, I love you!”

“Wait, could you not get so clingy? I only said when I have free time.”

Yukinoshita tried to wriggle her way out, but Yuigahama wouldn’t let go. Hiratsuka-sensei looked at both of them with distant eyes.

“Sure is nice to be young…”

Hurry! Someone hurry up and take her!

And then, there was one more person with a complicated expression, watching from afar.

“O-Ooph, an unthinkable sneak attack… Komachi’s magnificent plan… As expected, Onii-chan’s youth love comedy is wrong…”

Hahaha, what a shame, huh Komachi?

It didn’t matter what kind of plan you cooked up, onii-chan was a guy who got giddy just from getting invited by another guy.

…It looks like onii-chan was the one who should be ashamed.

Short Story 3

Surprisingly, **Hikigaya Hachiman's** study methods aren't wrong.

The Culture Festival came to an end and just as it was about to reach the height of autumn, the chilly open air also found its way to the interior of the Service Club room. And the cause of that was the "Chiba Prefecture Problem Consultation Mails".

Today as well, we were sent a worthless mail. The one reading it, Yuigahama, raised a small voice with an "uwah".

[Hachiman-sensei… I want to write a sellable light novel (shaky voice).]

Listening to Yuigahama reciting the mail aloud was Yukinoshita who spoke to me without closing her book.

"Hikigaya-kun. It looks like you're being requested."

Thank you for requesting me! I'm Hachiman ♪ (Side ☆ Peace)!

If I didn't force myself to be energetic internally, I thought my heart was going to break. Couldn't you designate this to a domain so it could be rejected or something? With irritation and anger at the darkness of the IT world, I typed my answer slightly violently.

[There are four components to a sellable light novel: "The first is illustrations, the second is its label, the third and fourth don't exist, and the fifth is force your way through." This is what I think personally. So using the aforementioned as a start, please try your best.]

Yukinoshita read the answer in one pass as her eyes narrowed dubiously. She then cocked her head in puzzlement.

"Where should the author put his effort into…?"

"Either the third or fourth one, right?"

When I answered, having read the mail as if looking at something fishy in the same way as Yukinoshita, Yuigahama raised her face.

"…Is it okay if you just leave that blank?"

"If it's just to sell something, then it's fine to keep it blank. The mail asked for a 'sellable light novel', not an 'interesting light novel'. They're not always equal in all cases."

When I said that, Yuigahama let out an impressed voice with a “wow” while Yukinoshita slightly nodded her head convincingly. Indeed, something that was sellable and something that was interesting were not the same thing. That’s why I love it man! GaGaGa Bunko! I’m looking forward to the work where I won’t have to fret over it selling!

As if she was feeling good from one incident being done, rather, the incident that she didn’t want to bother with, Yukinoshita unusually began reading the next mail.

“So, next one then? From a resident of Chiba, Pen Name: It’s Not Like I Need To Write My Name Since It’s A Consultation-san.”

[My little brother’s taking the entrance exam for high school this year, so I want to know some efficient study methods.]

The straight to the point content and the sharp pen name, not to mention it was about the little brother. Somehow, a really familiar face was popping up in my head.

“Yukinoshita, you’re pretty good with this, right?”

When I asked her, Yukinoshita placed her hand on her chin and began thinking.

“Efficient… It’s not something I really give any thought to. Since I just do it normally… If anything, aren’t these kinds of underhanded methods more your field?”

“At least say ‘good at’… Well, I’m pretty normal myself though. Understand past exam questions and a thorough review of what you get wrong. Depending on the material too, you just end up remembering things indiscriminately.”

“That’s surprisingly honest of you….”

She seemed earnestly surprised, but this girl’s rather rude, wasn’t she…? Well, it’s not like I didn’t think of anything underhanded, but that actually took some effort to think up too.

“While there are techniques you could use for test taking, you still have to go through the repetitions for them to stick.”

“They do tend to say that there aren’t shortcuts to learning.”

Yukinoshita said so solemnly. Thinking any further, that’s the kind of conclusion you’d settle with.

“Alright, guess I’ll answer with that in mind.”

And, just as I was thinking about what to write for the answer, Yuigahama stood up abruptly looking like she couldn’t hold herself back anymore

“Wait a second, why aren’t you asking me!? I took the test too! I really did take it, you know!?”

Yukinoshita didn’t pay any attention to Yuigahama’s appeal as she looked at the PC screen and let out a small “ah”.

“There’s still some left in the mail. **[…Also, I want to know how to wind down from study fatigue.]** or so.”

“It’s finally your time, Yuigahama! We’re counting on you for the refreshers part!”

“Hikki, your smile makes me upset! Besides, I’ve been giving it some proper thinking too!”

With a fit of anger, Yuigahama snatched the PC away and while moaning, she slowly typed the mail.

[How about studying together with him?? If you tell him to “just study!”, he might not end up wanting to. That’s why, Kawasaki-san, if you study together with him, he should think “I better get to it too~”. Ah, if you teach him things he doesn’t understand, that might be really effective too! And then, when you’re done studying, if you talk about different kinds of fun stories of high school, then that would be a good refresher too! Do your best!]

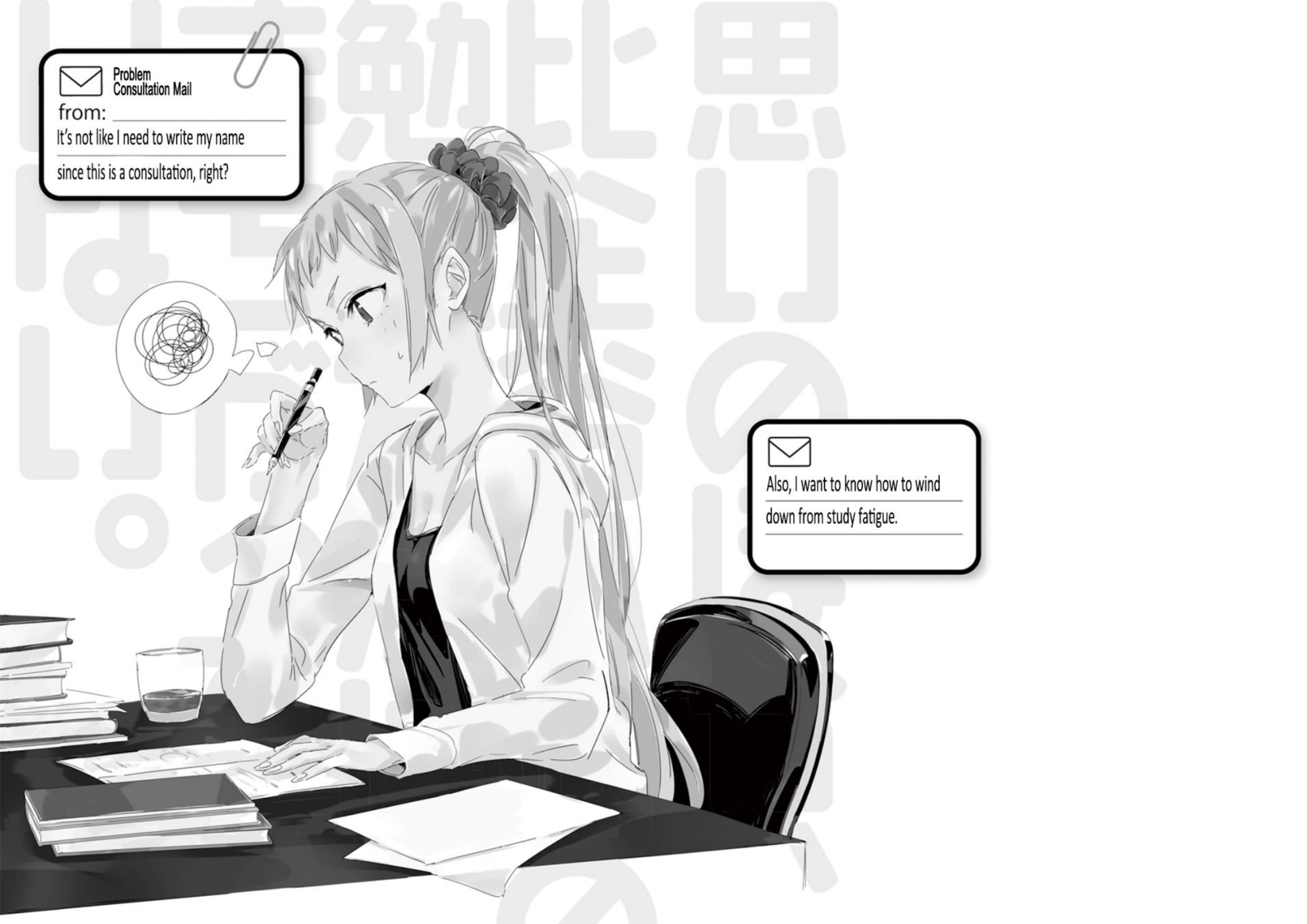
After finishing the answer, Yuigahama made a bragging “fufu”… Well, I could see why she was acting so proud. Even I was a little surprised from reading her answer. It looked like Yukinoshita was on the same boat.

“…Awfully rare of you to give an honest answer like this.”

“I suppose, for Yuigahama to write a decent answer like this is rather unusual…”

“That’s the part you meant rare!?”

As I watched with a sidelong glance at Yuigahama repeatedly hitting Yukinoshita’s chest half-crying going “waaah”, the fact the answer was actually a decent answer for once made me think this club was already beyond saving.


Problem
Consultation Mail
from:
It's not like I need to write my name
since this is a consultation, right?
Also, I want to know how to wind
down from study fatigue.

SIDE-B * Special Act.B

Even now, **they** still don’t know the place they should return to.

The periodic tests ended, followed by the start of the rainy season.

Extended rains had ceased, but even so, the bursts of sudden downpours that seemingly targeted the period when it was time to head home were frequent. It was because of this humidity that filled everything below the sky that this and that clung to your body.

Especially with Sobu High being positioned along the coast, the humidity from the sea was brought over in its entirety. The assimilated salty sea breeze was discoloring the paints and bikes, rusting the exposed iron fences.

As damp as the atmosphere was, it oddly gave rise to a feeling of invigoration.

That was because this time of the year which awaited the onset of summer vacation was the season where not only the normalfags would rustle about making plans for their frivolity, but also the loners who would be freed from the hell called school and become animated.

Would it be fine to call this the “charm of summer”?

Incidentally, the heat would make people go mad.

Because of that, even I was behaving strangely against my better judgment. It was the kind of behavior that wasn’t typical of me, that even I couldn’t help, but find odd.

The area wedged between the back of the school building and the annex was cooler than anywhere else due to it being under the shade. In contrast to the school building which was enclosed at all four corners like a square if you looked from above, this annex which abundantly stuck out was a place that the average student wasn’t familiar with. For the martial arts dojo below the gym, only if the sports club had a room there that people would pass by, but with it being lunch, no one came.

That being the case, there was no one else other than me and one more person.

The students who were exhilarated for the start of summer during lunch.

The faint, smell of salt that rode along the wind.

And the backside of the school building with no human presence.

It was a secret moment that only the two of us would spend together.

If I recited these kinds of things, it was as if I was listening to one tale of a summer's youth.

But reality was not so.

"Ku, ku, ku, I praise you for coming. My longtime enemy. Hachiman!"

That theatrical, to the point idiotic, annoying way of speaking was answered back with a voice that lacked motivation.

"I've finallyyyyy cornered youuuu, Master Swordsman Shoooogun."

When I monotonously responded in a way that would warrant talent and movie directors to complain about saying it to do it better, directly facing me, Zaimokuza quietly took his stance. Barf Spark annoying[1].

This was what reality was.

In this reality, it was just the two of us, Zaimokuza and I, taking refuge here in the shadows behind the school building where no one was at so no one could see us. Also, I was positive this smell of salt was actually the stink of sweat. Trick descriptions sure were scary!

I was just eating my lunch at my usual place by myself while watching from afar Totsuka doing his noon practice until Zaimokuza caught me.

I was then forced to read the plot of Zaimokuza's novel and before I realized it, in this blistering heat, I was engaging in chuunibyou antics with him.

This was my reality and the summer of my second year in high school. The summer of Japan, it was not the summer of Kincho.[2]

"Fumuu… Hachiman. Dare I say something is amiss with your dispirited attitude!? Why do you not take your stance!? You will not be able to stimulate my image like that!"

Zaimokuza voiced his complaints as he noisily stamped on the floor.

No, even if you told me that… When I blurted out I didn't understand the setting of the plot he wrote, Zaimokuza started a live performance. Before I knew it, things had turned out like this.

But even if I gave him a sound argument, it wouldn't get through to Zaimokuza. This was the Zaimokuza QUALITY. It would prove more advantageous to retaliate with emotions instead of logic.

I displayed a smile that mocked him.

"…This stance, huh…? This is the Formless Stance. By sheathing my power, I can counter any and all attacks."

"What the heck is that? That's cool!"

Given how I blurted out random knowledge I gained from RuroKen, the fact that Zaimokuza ate it up was good. Accepting it, he began pressing away on his

smart phone. He worried whether he wanted to go with that stance or the Universe Stance, but if that turned out to be a reference, then that was plenty.

"Nufu, after avoiding an attack and nullifying it, you follow up with a sermon punch[3]. This could get popular…"

I ignored Zaimokuza who was blubbering about something and leaned against the wall. Since it looked like I solved Zaimokuza's problem, I should be released now.

Forcing me into this stupid act made me sweat unpleasantly. The wind that blew past my red hot cheeks felt good.

I bathed in the wind that blew much further ahead of me and when I twisted my body, trying my hand at pretending to be T.M.Revolution, a strange spectacle flew into my sight.

A number of boys sporting a judo appearance were walking in stuttered steps with downfallen shoulders this way. Their judo outfits alone were enough to give them an overbearing appearance, yet they looked fragile somehow.

I thought only MY ANGEL Totsuka was the only one who went through the trouble of practicing during lunch, but was our judo club the same? Ah, MY ANGEL Totsuka. I want to answer this quiz correctly and raise him.

In Totsuka's case, he refreshingly, moreover, cutely, looked like he was having fun while cutely doing his noon practice, but that didn't seem to be the case for the passing judo folks..

Well, there's nothing they could do. Totsuka's special after all. Special Totsuka, in short, Totspecialka. "Special Totsuka is cute" was like a tongue twister.

On the other hand, the walking of the not special, not cute, and not Totsuka judo guys were like that of a zombie's and their expressions looked considerably exhausted… Were you guys all company employees or something!?

Still leaning against the wall, I slid down into a sitting position.

As I was watching the orderly judo club with a side glance, Zaimokuza who also seemed to have seen them was tilting his head in contemplation with a "fumuu".

"A rather suspicious group, were they not?"

"Uh, compared to you, not really…"

Perverts that wore coats during the summer were only people like Black Jack-sensei, you know…

"Rufun. Well, once you are on the same class as I, then you are already a Master Swordsman…"

Apparently taking those words as compliment, Zaimokuza snorted with pride. If you translated positive thinking in Japanese, didn't that mean "shitty, misunderstanding bastard"?

But pointing out Zaimokuza's misunderstanding didn't have any benefits at this point. That was probably the case for him internally and I mean only for him internally.

I removed my gaze from Zaimokuza and when I watched the guys in judo outfits turn the corner, a thought came to mind.

"Oh yeah, didn't you choose kendo for your martial arts?"

This time of the year for us second years was when gym would start doing martial arts. You had to choose between kendo and judo.

But you had to buy equipment for either of them. Since kendo equipment came in a complete set and was expensive, I opted for judo. I told my parents "I'm not sure what I'll do, but gimme money for kendo". This was what they called the Full Metal Jacket, the Small Change Alchemist.

I chose judo and since Zaimokuza wasn't there, through the process of elimination, that meant he went with kendo instead. Though, there was also the possibility that Zaimokuza's existence got eliminated as well.

"Homu, indeed. I most certainly did choose kendo. It was most natural. Is there something the matter?"

"No… I was just thinking how pitiful it'd be for the guys who'd have to pair up with you."

In reality, by virtue of it being gym, it was already quite the pain already. With kendo being in his field as well, then he'd probably be even more annoying.

"Worry not. It is preposterous I would use my power against the likes of common disciples. I will keep myself in check."

"Aah, is that so…"

So if I translated that to modern speak, then, "I-It's too embarrassing to expose that kind of setting in front of other people… That's why I'm going to stay put. H-Hachiman, you're the only person I can show this to, okay!" or something like that.

What the heck was that? That's disgusting.

Well, it was fine as long Zaimokuza wasn't a bother to other people. The reason why loners were allowed to exist was so they didn't harm other people. The pheasant would not be shot, but for its cries. But a pheasant that didn't cry was less than a pheasant. As an existence that served no value in beating, it could be thrown away. Could it be treated as if it didn't exist or could it be avoided as something that was hated? Either way, it was dead if it was Another.

"Hachiman, what did the likes of you decide upon?"

As if he was displeased at my attitude, Zaimokuza pouted and asked. But my answer was exceedingly simple. There wasn't a speck of surprise in it.

"The guys in the judo club partnered with me. The rest was just practicing ukemi[4]."

"Homuu… You surely mean care-taking, not partnering, correct…?"

While wiping the sweat at his brow, Zaimokuza said.

But it wasn't something to be surprised about. Whenever a particular competition was held, it was the fate of the club members related to get the short end of the stick. They'd be told to show a demonstration and they had to prepare as well as clean up the equipment. Calmly overlooking this overtime labor was the darkness of the sports oriented world. Rumor had it that the sports clubs were to rear future corporate slaves; inside of me that is.

That's why the people of the judo club could not cease taking care of me… Was that the reason for their dark expressions? Sorry, okay?

But it weighing on mind wouldn't change this tradition. As if I could go out of my way to skip class just for them. There was no one to help the loners, so they had to make sure to attend all their classes.

Sorry to the judo guys, but for now, I'll be a nuisance to you all.

After solidifying my defiance, the chime indicating the end of lunch rang. I stood up and wiped off the sand stuck to my behind.

"Okay, I'm heading back to class."

Saying that, I turned my back and the sound of footsteps followed me as if it was natural.

"Hamon. Indeed, let us go."

Eh? We're going back together? I was pretty sure I meant, "I'll be going back by myself". I sent him a doubtful stare, but Zaimokuza paid no heed and instead made an oppressive "fufun" laugh.

"What are you dawdling about for? With haste, with haste! Eey, slow! I will head out first!"

He snappily turned towards the school building and pointed. To put the words Zaimokuza spoke just now in modern speak, "What's wrong? Let's hurry and go back okay…? Ah, but, if rumors of us going back together spread… It'd be kind of embarrassing…"

It didn't even make me angry if I thought about it like that. It just disgusted me.

× × ×

I finished up the afternoon classes and headed for the club room.

Due to the nature of today's era, our high school was equipped with air conditioning, enabling us to take classes comfortably during the summer. But outside of class was a different story. The same could be said for after school.

Even on a hot day like this, while heading for the Service Club room located in the inner depths of the special building, I could feel a cooling sensation either because the club room was situated in a spot under the shade or that the ventilation was splendid. Or possibly, it could've been because of the leaking aura of the club room's master. I was sure that this coolness that made your spine shiver was from the latter. Aah, also, her breasts were also cool too!

While engrossing myself in pointless thoughts regarding the coolness of the special building, I opened the door and a slightly, exceedingly so, cold stare was thrust at me.

"…Good work."

After receiving the shooting glint in her eyes from Yukinoshita Yukino, I couldn't help but falter. What, why was this person so angry? Did my thoughts from earlier get across to her somehow? With Yukinoshita as the esper, I as the satorare[5], the second big controversy would happen again.

"…Oh, it was Hikigaya-kun. You were making a rather damp looking face that I thought an amphibian had entered the room."

"Well, youth consequently made me feel wet, so there's not much I can do there. Make sure not to tell Hiratsuka-sensei that. Because she would totally be bothered by it."

Once we exchanged our usual greeting, I sat at my designated seat that was directly opposite from Yukinoshita.

While looking like her typical displeased self, Yukinoshita didn't say anything more in particular. Shen then dropped her eyes back to the book at her hands.

I could see that she wasn't in the greatest of moods, though it didn't seem to have been from her enmity, hatred, and dislike of me. The proof of that lied with how she would normally add a few more words of sarcasm, but today she was rather docile. Then again, she would normally say a bit too much though.

If I wasn't the reason for her discontent, then why was she in such a bad mood? You'll just make the mood of the place worse so stop it. Was she one of those OLs that were harshly treated like tumors depending on the difference between their good and bad moods?

Since I didn't have anything particular to do, I pulled a book out from my bag as well. I flipped and skimmed through the pages randomly, making occasional glances at Yukinoshita.

"…Phew."

The only thing she was doing was reading yet she was sighing. In the meantime, it almost looked like her stress was gradually building up. What, was the book really that boring? You know you could just stop reading…

Well, it was pointless to say something to people who were privately generating their own stress, intoxicating themselves even. Only the person himself could clear away their pent up stress.

Leaving her to her own devices, I lowered my gaze to my book once again and just as I was about to engross myself in reading, the noisy sounding of creaking filled the room.

"Yahallo!"

Barging into the room with a midsummer, sultry greeting was Yuigahama Yui. As she noisily made stepping sounds, she sat at her usual seat.

As of late, Yuigahama's skirt had been much shorter than before. In addition to that, she stopped wearing navy blue socks, more often using ankle socks. The short sleeves of her blouse were rolled up too. It was totally an appearance meant for summer. With a relative look, you could even say that the exposure of her arms and legs had increased. Well, it's not like I was scrutinizing her in detail or anything, it's just something you end up noticing, what with having to see her every day. It'd be a problem if you underestimated the observing eyes of a loner.

"It sure is hot!"

Having arrived at her seat, Yuigahama grabbed the blouse at her bosom and flapped it. Stop doing those things. You can't expect me not to look, really.

Speaking of which, although she was blabbering about it being really hot, she wasn't wearing a polo shirt or an open-necked shirt, huh? It was a little unexpected. Maybe she was slightly obsessed with the ribbon or something?

Hoping to avert my stare from Yuigahama, I focused my attention on the book in my hands. After that, I used an extra amount of strength to pull the pages that were normally stuck together already from the humidity and it wrinkled nosily.

Aah, I better rest something on the page later… It was a sad thing to do to the books you loved. It was also one of the many unpleasant things of this season.

It's not like it was Yuigahama's fault, in fact, it was completely mine. But really, um, I even felt kind of bad for looking at her, but as long Yuigahama was one of the reasons for this, as unfair as it was, I couldn't help, but send a slightly reproachful look to Yuigahama. No, it's not because she was flapping her blouse at her chest that bothered me, or that it was strange how surprisingly long her legs were; it was just an unjustified, resenting stare. Whatever it was, it was the most despicable reason.

But that was seemingly a needless concern as Yuigahama didn't pay any heed to my stare and instead was being considerate with Yukinoshita.

“Yukinon, is something wrong?”

Had it been anyone else, they wouldn’t think to call out to Yukinoshita who was in a bad mood. If anything, even Yukinoshita’s regular attitude was a high enough hurdle already.

However, the current Yuigahama could do it.

If it was like before, she certainly wouldn’t have overstepped her boundaries and would’ve asked about something harmless. For her to ask so directly was proof that the distance between the two had shortened.

Ever since Yuigahama’s birthday, I got the feeling that the needless consideration and reservation between the two had decreased.

Yukinoshita stopped her movements as well, wondering whether she should talk now that she was spoken to. But when it came to Yuigahama, she would try to answer sincerely.

“It’s just the humidity’s so awful that it curls…”

“Aah, the humidity, huh? I get that too and it makes it hard to fix up my hair. It’s so annoying.”

In contrast to Yukinoshita who let out a sigh as she rubbed her book, Yuigahama roughly fiddled with her hair.

“Fix up? I’m the opposite. The humidity causes it to warp, so it sticks together… It’s really stressful.”

“Eeh? That’s not true at all.”

When she said that, Yuigahama stood up and went around behind Yukinoshita. In disregard to Yukinoshita’s puzzled face, she gently caressed Yukinoshita’s hair.

“It’s super silky. Aah, but, it’s probably a little hot, huh?”

“…Yuigahama-san? What are you doing?”

“Mmm. Got it.”

Yuigahama was rummaging around in her pockets, but took something out. She then wrapped it around her fingers and spun it around. It looked like a hair band.

Furthermore, after reaching out to her bag and taking out a brush, she slowly, but carefully brushed Yukinoshita’s hair. When she bundled her long, smooth, black hair together, she lifted her hair up and tied it.

“Having long hair during summer traps heat, so keeping your hair this way’s a lot better, right?”

“Y-Yes. That’s true…”

Hearing her thoughts, Yukinoshita was confused as she answered. She was slightly hesitant, not used to having people fiddling with her hair. It was a rather rare sight to see.

“Um… So, Yuigahama-san? Why my hair… Um, were you listening to me?”

Of course, Yuigahama wasn’t listening.

As she consolidated Yukinoshita’s hair while humming, she fixed her hair to give the finishing touches. Even so, her long black hair looked like it was going to spill out and turn into a mess. When she fastened it with the hairpin she took from her breast pocket, she completed the bobtail.

“All done…! We might match a little.”

When she examined the completed makeover, she made a satisfied smile going “heehee”. If you compared their hairstyles, certainly, they looked rather similar.

“More like fake than match.”

“Your mouth! Watch it!”

Yuigahama snapped at me. It looked like she was very proud of her work.

You could tell me to watch it all you want. There wasn’t anything else I could say… It was like Tamagotchi[6] or TAMAGOTCHI[7] or Digimon or Gyaoppi[8]. Was there anything else I could say, I wonder?

“…Does knockoff work?”

“That’s no different!”

For the most part, I was being considerate when I chose these words that had clearer intentions… Still, in reality, I wasn’t sure what to say. It wasn’t anything like 2P[9]characters or anything, in truth, the fact that it didn’t look similar, but was trying to made it even more of a fake…

“Speaking of which, doesn’t the clashing hairstyle bother you?”

When it came to high school students, they tended to blabber on about individuality, individuality and especially when it came to fashion, the girls definitely had their say, but how was it really? Or could it be that if you lived your life reading the mood like Yuigahama, would Kaneko MIsuzu Exceptional People: “Everyone is Together and Everyone is Wonderful”[10] happen instead?

Yuigahama raised her face going “mmm” and thought, but her answer was simple given how long she took.

“Well, if we get along, then it wouldn’t matter, right?”

Aah, I see… Both of you get along pretty well, huh…

I mistook her happy answer for poison. I let out a short sigh mixed with shock and returned to my reading.

When I did, Yukinoshita who was left behind the entire time opened her mouth.

“Um… Exactly how does it look?”

The person in question, Yukinoshita, wasn’t aware of how her head was. Yuigahama grabbed a rectangular hand mirror and passed it to her.

“Here you go!”

“Thank you.”

Yukinoshita placed her book on the desk and took the hand mirror.

She then flipped it open, reflecting herself. Her eyes gently narrowed with her expression turning into a puzzled one. She then clamped the mirror and she directed a doubtful stare to Yuigahama.

“…Yuigahama-san, why my hair?”

When asked, Yuigahhama blinked in confusion.

“Eh? Weren’t you saying how your hair was bothersome and annoying?”

“What I was talking about was this.”

Yukinoshita pointed at the book on the desk and continued.

“The humidity damages the book and having to wring it out takes time… So that’s why.”

“Ah, so that’s what you were talking about… I thought for sure…”

Yuigahama let out a “tahaha” while scratching her head.

Hair and paper just didn’t mingle for you, huh? I understand… God, why would you make me have these stupid thoughts?

Well, Yuigahama didn’t read books, so when she heard “kami”[11], the first that would come to mind would be hairstyles. The scope of her interests was different.

On the other hand, Yukinoshita although not totally indifferent to fashion, probably liked books more. But true enough, for readers, the summer humidity was quite the obstacle. Also, hand sweat. Definitely this. Sweat from your hand would cause the pages to stick together. And when the dripping sweat gets on the paper, you’d go,“Fa!?”[12], and even get depressed too .

Yuigahama tried to brush it off with a laugh and abruptly rose from her seat going as if suddenly realizing.

“Ah, I-I’m sorry! I’ll fix your hair!”

“It’s not a big deal.”

Yukinoshita quickly averted her gaze. Although she said that, she looked interested in her own hair as she opened the mirror again, checking both the left and right sides of her head and rubbed the bobtail.

"…It's refreshing."

Although she added that at the end, that didn't look like the case with her flushed red cheeks. It seemed like Yukinoshita-san had taken a liking to her hair, hm…?

Seeing that, Yuigahama made a happy smile and flew at Yukinoshita.

"Right, right!?"

"So hot…"

Yukinoshita tried to look upset, but it only looked like she was trying to hide her embarrassment. Though on the other hand, it was making my heart completely cold…

Since it looked like Yukinoshita's in a better mood, I'll leave the rest to the two youngsters and go home, maybe! Alright, let's go home.

When I placed my book in my bag, I quietly stood up so I wouldn't be noticed. I took a step towards the door. It was exactly when I took that step the sounds of banging came from the door.

"Come in."

Judging that as a knock, Yukinoshita immediately answered.

"Excus' us."

Along with a completely incomprehensible greeting that resembled the cutting noise of the came in solemn looking guys. There were three guys who resembled a potato, a sweet potato, and a taro.

This season was hot enough already, yet they were making it feel unnecessarily even more so. It was that precise moment when the temperature of my body tripled.

× × ×

The three young men stood at attention, enveloped in the same, homogeneous atmosphere. Although their appearances were different respectively, the impact they gave off were similar.

Amongst the three, one person looked familiar. He sported an appearance like a potato and he looked like he had recognized my face as well and spoke to me.

"Ah. Err, during gym…"

"Yeah…"

I gave a short reply and raised my hand. That's right. He was the good person that always took care of me in judo during gym. He didn't work his self to the bone, but he was a good person. Not that I remembered his name or anything.

So did that mean the other two were from the judo club? As my gaze was wandering around, Yuigahama and Yukinoshita looked into my face.

“Friend?”

“Acquaintance?”

There was a questionable difference in how they asked just now. Just why would Yukinoshita-san ask me under the assumption I was friendless, huh…? It’s not like she was wrong or anything.

“No, I don’t know his name. We were paired up in gym.”

“You were together, yet you don’t know…”

Yuigahama was astounded. No, there were actually people who’d get weirdly cozy with you if you somehow remembered their names… Then again, I actively didn’t try to remember people’s names. During middle school, I was called creepy just because I remembered everybody’s name in my class. That was the first time having a good memory was actually harmful instead. Since then, I would commit names to memory vaguely. Like Kawasomething-san.

For the most part, I was trying to be considerate by talking in a small voice, but it looked like I was heard. The potato made a bitter smile. But since he didn’t seem to have recalled my name either, we were even.

The potato spoke with a resounding voice, deeper than you’d expect.

“I’m Shiroyama from the judo club. These guys are my juniors…”

“Tsukui, yeah.”

“Fujino, yeah.”

We truly thank you for your sultry, instrumental trio self-introduction. But their lack of distinguishing characteristics made them hard to remember. It was a pain so let’s go with potato, sweet potato, and taro; I hereby dub them the three potato brothers.

“I’m the club president, Yukinoshita. She’s one of our club members, Yuigahama-san.”

Yukinoshita directed her hand at Yuigahama and introduced her. Uh huh, I do believe there was one more person here though.

But not touching on that at all, Yukinoshita advanced the conversation. “Now then”, with a fresh start, she questioned the three potato brothers.

“Can I assume that you understand what kind of club this is?”

“Yeah. I heard from Hiratsuka-sensei that you guys handled annoying problems regarding school…”

The potato Shiroyama, the Potayama said.

Hiratsuka-sensei again, huh…? Then again, the explanation she gave was sloppy. Somehow, we were starting to sound like trouble contractors[13], in short, TROCON. Were we slaughtering coconut crabs or something?

Potayama's answer made Yukinoshita press against her temple.

"Strictly speaking, that's a little off…"

"I think it's mostly accurate though."

Yuigahama said with a blank look.

Well, when it came to how Yuigahama understood it, that's probably how she saw it. Yukinoshita had an odd idealization of it so if you looked at it from the side, then it was seen as a place for problem consultation and handymen.

As such, the three potato brothers who found themselves here visited with some kind of problem.

"So, what business do you have here?"

When I inquired, the sweet potato and the taro were going to open their mouths, but were stopped by Potayama. It looked like their senpai was going to give us the explanation himself. A good senpai, I'd say.

"Yeah, er, it's a little hard to say, but… Recently, there have been a lot of members claiming they were going to quit. I also happen to have their resignation letters with me here too."

Judging from his tone, Potayama must've been the club president.

Must be nice being able to resign from club activities… I wanted to quit mine too, but I wasn't allowed to, see. Were they an evil club[14]" or something?

The president of the evil club placed his hand on his chin going "fumu" and made a thinking gesture.

"Members that'll replace those who want to leave… Do you have people in mind?"

"That's…"

Shiroyama mumbled. But honestly, it wasn't something that needed to be asked.

"Well, that's just how the judo club is. It's hard, it's painful, and since it's a smelly 3K[15] club with sound effects all over the place, there wasn't much you could do, right?"

When I stated that, the sweet potato and the taro fiercely argued back.

"I-It doesn't smell, yeah!"

"But it's true that it's hard and painful, yeah!"

Tsukui and Fujino. I couldn't tell the two apart, but for now, I could see that the sweet potato was sensitive to smell while the taro was lacking in guts.

"You guys shut up for a bit."

"Yes sir."

When Potayama rebuked them, the two retreated. As expected of the sports minded, they were incredibly well trained.

“Hikigaya-kun, you be quiet for a moment as well.”

“Yes ma’am…”

Yukinoshita glared at me with cold eyes and I obediently withdrew. I was incredibly well trained.

Having noticed that the conversation was at a standstill, Shiroyama tried to continue on.

“So, people in mind, you said?”

“Right, right.”

Yuigahama gestured, urging him to go on.

“It’s about our senpai that graduated last year… He’s currently a college student right now, but recently, he’s been coming to watch our practice. And the thing is, he’s just a bit out there, you see…”

As if he was having trouble trying to say his words, they gradually grew more mumbled. But to compensate for that, relatively powerful voices were raised in succession.

“It’s terrible, yeah!”

“It’s gruesome, yeah!”

Compared to how they were earlier, their voices were filled with a tinge of tragedy and even Shiroyama couldn’t keep them in check this time.

Following that, the words of the two passionately continued further.

“He tells us how cruel the world is and makes us go through gruesome training, yeah! He totally throws us hard too!”

“The very first person that loses in the randori[16] gets forced into shopping! He would then eat stuff like beef bowls in front of ten people, yeah!”

“He gets upset when we use our techniques on him, yeah!”

“It’s unfair to the point terrible!”

They continued to alternate between each other. By using loud voices and on top of trying to speak quickly, they grew short of breath and Tsukui and Fujino both went “haa, haa” in exhaustion.

Just as they were about to say some more, Yukinoshita faced them with a cold gaze which caused them to lose their energy and become quiet. Yukinoshita waited and then opened her mouth.

“I understand the situation. Basically, you want us to do something about that senpai, correct?”

Just as Yukinoshita said, I could only think that the source of all the problems was that senpai. At the very least, the sweet potato and the taro weren't awfully too fond of him. So those who were looking to quit the club were probably doing so for a similar reason like that.

In that case, amputating the affected part was the quickest way to go about things.

But Shiroyama shook his head. He then opened his mouth solemnly.

"…No, that's impossible."

"Impossible? Why?"

Yuigahama tilted her head in confusion.

"If he was someone that would listen after talking to him, then things wouldn't have become like this… Besides, outsiders saying something didn't really mean anything, right?"

It looked like Shiroyama may have tried talking to him several times. Though, I could only imagine feebly. Since earlier, he gave off the impression that he was trying to avoid mentioning anything that would directly allude to his senpai, carefully choosing his words in regard to him as well. It was either his discretion or he was keeping him at arm's length out of respect.

Clubs weren't the only place where outsiders had trouble getting their thoughts in. Thinking someone needed to shut up whenever they blabbered on about things they had no idea of the circumstances was what they'd call empathy. Though in cases where it was a sound argument, then they wouldn't try to listen out of stubbornness.

If so, it would be best to hear directly from the related parties.

"The problem is?"

When I asked, Shiroyama's shoulders dropped.

"Our advisor is inexperienced at judo. That's why we end up welcoming our senpai to teach us instead."

"Ah, then, then, how about a third year?"

"They all retired at the last tournament."

Shiroyama immediately answered Yuigahama's question as well. It's likely that Shiroyama had given it some consideration up until now. Once he realized it was impossible, he gave up.

Shiroyama had already arrived at his conclusion.

"I don't think he would listen regardless of who spoke to him. Our senpai's strong after all. Even if we didn't win the team tournaments, he would always win the singles tournaments. He even got into college on a judo recommendation too."

Casually, Shiryoama's directed his gaze to the distance. As if he was remembering the past.

"Oooh… College on a sports recommendation, huh? Ain't that something."

I see. From my calculations, that meant he was a third year while we were first years. Even for Shiroyama who was acquainted with his senpai, he'd have trouble talking back.

Not to mention his ability was more than enough. In that case, the current third years wouldn't be able to oppose him, let alone the amateur advisor.

I see. So they had no choice but to put up with it quietly. In the face of long service and ability, the hierarchical relationship wasn't something that could be overturned so easily.

Not having interjected a single word up until that point and processing the conversation, Yukinoshita removed her hand from her chin.

"If this isn't in regards to your senpai, then I take it the problem would be acquiring new members?"

When Yukinoshita asked, Shiroyama slightly moved his head and answered.

"Yeah. I doubt the club will be abolished, but at this rate, we won't be able to participate in team tournaments."

"New members, huh… It's not like we're dealing with cellphones here, so I don't think we'll be able to gather people that easily…"

Especially since we're talking about the judo club here.

People who liked the judo club; in the first place, if they didn't have any sort of interest, then it probably wouldn't come up as a potential extracurricular activity. It may be odd coming from me, but for high school students, it wasn't a very popular club.

"How about getting the people who want to quit to come back?"

When Yuigahama suggested, Yukinoshita nodded while crossing her arms with a "hm".

"I suppose so. At the very least, compared to the average student, there's a higher chance of having them rejoin the club since they were interested in judo from the start."

Happy that Yukinoshita agreed with her opinion, Yuigahama suddenly jumped at her.

"Yeah, yeah! Besides, like, if they somehow overcome this danger, then they just might end up getting along better, or something!"

Although she was a bit annoying, Yukinoshita didn't harshly push her away. At the most, she would try to maintain just a little distance by thrusting her hand

out. From just sporting a similar hairstyle, their exchange made you think how close they were.

Well, I really did think these two had gotten really close. Ever since Yuigahama left and came back to the club, you could certainly say their relationship had made some progress.

But that was just a unique precedent. It was because the Service Club was a relaxing club or possibility because of Yukinoshita and Yuigahama's personalities that they were able to make it happen. That was how I saw it.

"Fundamentally, people who run away don't come back."

"I wonder…"

As she said that, Yuigahama gave up on hugging Yukinoshita and instead compromised with rubbing her shoulders. Even so, Yukinoshita looked a little displeased.

Let's stop doing that when customers were present, okay, you two?

To avert the attention of the members of the judo club away, I started a conversation with Shiroyama.

"So how is it? Can you expect the leavers to come back?"

"…That's might be difficult."

Shiroyama for a moment explored that possibility, but he lightly shook his head.

I thought so. Having someone return after quitting the first time from club activities was rather difficult. Compared to a relaxed club like our Service Club, other worked on different logic.

The so called sports-minded folks all followed their own set of ethics. For example, consider the hierarchical relationship or camaraderie. Those had their virtues, but were also bad practices.

Bonds could also be interpreted as bindings.

It's because they were once friends that the oppression against those who stopped being friends became harsher. The feeling that those who left and came back were traitors might've existed as well.

If in particular the reason they quit was due to the senpai's grueling training, then unless he was eliminated, then expecting their return to the club was pointless.

"…In any case, we won't fully grasp the situation unless we see it for ourselves."

"Sounds about right. Guts differ from person to person after all. Anyway, why don't we have a look at your practice then?"

Just maybe there was the possibility that the senior's grueling training wasn't anything that difficult and that the people who quit were just good-for-nothings with no spine. In reality, there were people who endured through it and remained even now.

When I moved my gaze to the trio who stayed behind after enduring it all, the head, Shiroyama, nodded.

"Got it. Senpai didn't come today, so does tomorrow work?"

Whatever the case, I didn't have any plans, so I left the judgment to Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. When I looked at the two wondering what we should do, Yuigahama who also didn't seem to have any objections, looked at Yukinoshita as did I.

Taking our gazes, Yukinoshita replied.

“Yes. We don’t mind.”

“Okay, tomorrow it is then.”

Yuigahama continued after her and raised her hand indicating “it’s nice to work with you”.

“Thank you for your help.”

Potayama politely expressed his gratitude as did the two potatoes and they left the room.

After watching the three left, I looked outside the window.

Summer had only just started, yet the sun was still high up despite the encroaching evening. The sun that dazzled brilliantly in the sky made me think how the hot the judo dojo was right now.

× × ×

It was the following day after the judo club, Shiroyama with the other two, came to the Service Club.

The three of us decided to take a peek at the judo club’s practice.

The judo dojo was located on the first floor of the gymnastics building. There were windows situated at our feet seemingly to increase the ventilation for the gym. We maneuvered our way from outside and secretly watched through it.

When you thought of high school club activities, you’d be filled with refreshing images.

Scattering sweat. Shrilling cheers. And emotional tears.

You would imagine that kind of wonderful, Youth Graffiti[17].

But reality was different.

Wrung out sweat, gloomy screams. And just tears.

The few members of the judo club were fervently working hard at their club activities to the point that I could vomit.

It didn’t look fun at all…

The primary reason being for that was the aforementioned senpai.

There was a man with a conspicuously, stern appearance, clad in the judo uniform. His physique was evidently different from the other members.

He was watching the club members’ practice, standing imposingly at the kamiza[18].

Though I said practice, all they were doing for their practice was just running around.

Including Shiroyama as well as the two that accompanied him yesterday, the numerous other members were running endlessly around in the judo dojo. Was

there something in judo that had to do with running around inside a building? I didn't know the details, but having to run inside this sweltering judo dojo on the level of a heat wave looked difficult.

After the senior or whatever glanced at the clock, he slowly got up.

"That's enough. Those who were late will run for the amount of time they were late. As for the rest, we'll start randori."

"Uwah, that looks freaking hard…"

Yuigahama took a quick peek from behind and said.

"I suppose. On the surface it does look difficult, but considering it looks wholesome and safe, I'm not so sure…"

Furthermore, sticking from behind Yuigahama was Yukinoshita who continued.

True enough, it was like Yukinoshita said. While there were still some concerns left, so far, the practice looked unexpectedly wholesome. Not that I'd want to be a part of it. Just the words "relentless sports club" made me want to pack up and leave.

We watched for a little longer, the practice being slightly different from what we had thought, but once they started practice, the atmosphere clearly changed.

"Hopeless! You, go run until you're dead!"

They were words spat out with a violent voice.

"Just having it done once to you won't mean much for your studies, am I right? Even I was taught like that by my senpai. If your body doesn't remember, then it won't stick after all."

It was a one-sided ongoing demonstration of his techniques.

"Crying from something at this level won't get you anywhere in society. Things like high school clubs are completely easy. The world is a much crueler place."

It was an unending lecture.

Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and I went silent.

Honestly speaking, these were events from another dimension. There was no doubt that there were probably clubs out there in the world that were harder and more painful than this judo club.

But the most abnormal thing here might've been those club members who were controlled by the senpai, without ever having voiced a single complaint.

Having to look at one or the other wasn't a very pleasant feeling.

I believed that as people and as living creatures, avoiding things that were unpleasant was instinctive and the things that couldn't acknowledge that were questionable.

That's why you couldn't blame those who ran away from this situation. What should be criticized was the tendency that blamed those who ran away.

With this, the plan to call back the members who left had disappeared.

"This should be enough."

When I said that, I moved away from the window and confirmed with the other two. After the two nodded their heads, they turned around and started off for the club.

Just one last time, I turned around.

From the window, I could see a small glimpse of Shiroyama practicing in silence. When I turned my back on that with a feeling of reluctance, I began heading for the club as well.

In any case, we had grasped the current situation with the judo club.

Now what was left was to think up a plan.

× × ×

Once we made it back to the club room, we could finally relax. Since we were also outside, entering this cool room made it feel as if this room was a comfortable place to be.

Whenever the salary men who worked outside returned to their company, they probably felt it was like heaven. If that happened, then that was proof you were whipped into shape as a corporate slave. Please be urgent and take the interview for the Occupational Health Physicians.

As I drank my cold MAX COFFEE that I bought on the way back to the room, the first thing on the menu was to organize our impressions of the judo club.

"To put things bluntly, what do you guys think?"

"Even if you ask that… I've never watched other judo clubs before so I don't have anything to compare it to, but disregarding that, it didn't feel very wholesome."

After Yukinoshita thought for a brief moment, she spoke while carefully choosing her words. Certainly, that was important when comparing things, but I felt just because it was being elsewhere didn't mean it'd be a theory. It should be fine to take that opinion as encompassing up to that point.

On the other hand, Yuigahama's answer was simple.

"Stuff like that is totally impossible for me…"

While her words were brief, they were also packed considerable implications. It could've been about the image in regards to the competition, the members, the

senpai, or even the sight of the practice. There wasn't likely a way to generalize all those with just one word, but it was probably an opinion that encompassed all of them.

"How about you, Hikki?"

"Can't say I like it."

My answer was similar to Yuigahama's as well.

In the first place, I had been living my life that didn't tie in with sports. I mean, they required teamwork and stuff, you know? Because of that, my experience with sports wasn't very much and my understanding of them was shallow.

That's why I didn't have a particularly worthwhile viewpoint on the subject, but at the very least, the present situation of the judo club at Sobu High was incompatible with my sense of values.

"Rather rare for our opinions to be in agreement."

As Yukinoshita said, all three of our opinions in regards to that spectacle were negative.

In that case, we should've been able to move the conversation along.

"I think the request was to recruit more members, but…"

Yuigahama confirmed one more time. The request we had undertaken was interpreted to be just that one objective alone and nothing else. In other words, that was the matter we had to prioritize.

"Well, we'll have to find a way to solicit people somehow."

"If that's the case, we'll have to improve their image."

If we couldn't get across to people that there were a lot of good things to judo as well as merits, not limited to just Sobu High's judo club, then we would be hard-pressed to gather new members from this point on.

Even if we went through the process sequentially, raising the image was required.

As the three of us were thinking with our heads tilted in contemplation, Yuigahama clapped her hands together.

"Ah, what if we announce that doing judo will make you popular or something?"

So simple…

Somehow, Yuigahama's eyes were sparkling as she was saying that, but that was ludicrously simplistic.

"Would you believe that if you were told that?"

"…Pretend I didn't say that."

The instant I shot her down, Yuigahama immediately retracted her opinion and readjusted her sitting dejectedly.

Whenever you started something, the very first reason that would come to mind was “I might get popular”. But think about it rationally. Getting popular while doing some sort of sport or getting popular from playing in a band; those things just weren’t true.

Those who were popular would be popular regardless of what they did. In fact, they’d still be popular if they didn’t do anything. Since the boys who weren’t popular were enlightened to that truth, resorting to that wouldn’t have an effect.

As I was considering other hooks, Yukinoshita took a short breath.

“How about a diet of the sort?”

“Those guys are athletes that work really hard, you know. Stuff like how food is part of their training or something…”

Your body was an important asset in sports that came with strenuous activities. Since they had to build a sturdy body along with satisfying their calorie intake, they consumed quite a lot of food. In the world of sports, being able to eat a lot was supposedly a talent in itself.

Again, Yuigahama made a bitter expression going “bleh”.

“Then again, it seems rough on your muscles…”

With this reaction, it didn’t look like muscles would work as attractive lures either…

In fact, if we were just trying to fish in those who wanted to build muscles, then weren’t they just better off gulping as much protein as they could instead?

As we continued to groan with our arms crossed, unable to think of any worthwhile ideas, only the time ticked by.

When the long hand of the clock shifted to a 90 degree angle, Yukinoshita undid her crossed arms and performed a little stretch. It was a gesture that resembled a cat who was tired despite having slept all day. Apparently she was trying to change her thoughts.

“Rather than improve their image, it’s no good if we don’t start at their core first.”

She stated her reasoning. In other words, she gave up. That was inevitable. Between the important people related to judo who gave it their all into pondering what to do as opposed to what we could think up of in the small timeframe we had, it was impossible for us.

Even if we came up with something innovative, there was nothing to support it and with our power, it’d be difficult to try to propagate the idea as well.

“Established notions aren’t things that can be changed so easily after all.”

“Hmm… Then I guess we’ll have to invite people straightforwardly.”

Yuigahama groaned to my words.

Well, that’s probably the correct way to go. But just because it was the correct way didn’t mean it would always lead to the correct answer.

“We won’t get anyone if we just try to recruit normally. If it was that simple, then there’d be a flood of new recruits already.”

By all means, I didn’t think there was a lack of guys interested in judo, but when it boiled down to it, if there wasn’t a reason that pushed them along or they were in an environment to do so, they’d have trouble stepping forward.

“To add, jumping into an ongoing club is a high hurdle as well.”

“…I guess so.”

As if that was an understandable point, Yuigahama returned a small nod and looked convinced.

That’s just how it was for everything.

That applied to part time jobs too. Nothing but fear was associated with already established relationships. While they may go the extra mile by holding a welcome party for the newcomers, it was ultimately just for them. I mean, what’s that about? “You ain’t got a seat!” Did they want to say this indirectly or something? Thanks to that, reading the mood led me to quitting the job, damn it!

The fear of joining midway wasn’t just limited to relationships. There were others.

“Also, there’s that. When it comes to sports, your actual skill comes to light, so there’re a lot of people who hesitate to take the step forward.”

When I said that, Yukinoshita went “hm” and crossed her arms once again.

“So in other words, you want to emphasize the point that they’ll get stronger from this point forth.”

“Well not that, but I want to emphasize that there isn’t anything to be embarrassed about joining a club halfway through.”

“Ah, that might work. The people around would end up feeling depressed too….”

Thank you for your endorsement. Because Yuigahama disliked being overly sensitive with the reactions around her, she was savvy to this truth and that was helpful.

Compared to her, when it came to Yukinoshita, she was incredibly impressed to the point that it might’ve been the first time I’ve seen her like this.

“I see. That’s Hikigaya-kun for you. When it comes to falling behind people, you won’t lose to anyone in that regard either. Quite insightful.”

“Hey now? Please watch your words, okay? Because I’m unexpectedly proficient at this, you know?”

I was proficient to the point that it would come back to bite me, like at my part time job where I remembered how to do things so quickly that it caused people to say “that guy ain’t cute at all—“, okay?

But not lending an ear to what I had to say, Yukinoshita began organizing the main points together.

“That being the case, it seems we’ll need to think of a way to solicit people such that it stands out even in this off-season. We want to emphasis that the judo’s strength is nothing to be amazed about and that they’re completely untrained and undisciplined.”

For the most part, she was hitting all the right notes, but the way she put it was really harsh…

Still, we managed to distinguish the matters at hand, but the actual solution was still far away. After we dug out the main points, the conditions to succeed became complicated.

To satisfy all of those conditions meant we may have to do so by unordinary means. Would it better to solve each one as an individual problem instead?

Whatever the case, the problem was how to appeal to the students. Still, I had the feeling being completely untrained and having charm were things that wouldn’t ever meet eye to eye.

While running through various thoughts in my head, Yuigahama suddenly shot up her hand.

“Here! Here, here, here!”

“…Yes, Yuigahama-san?”

Yukinoshita recited her name aloud with astonishment, finding her repetition fussy.

When she did, Yuigahama stood up for some reason with a smile plastered on her entire face.

“How about something like an event? Like, they usually have those In-Col type club stuff, see. So if we do something along those lines with an event or something, it would gather a lot of people or so.”

Unable to hold in her excitement from her own suggestion, Yuigahama spoke rapidly. I had no problems in understanding what she was saying, but words I weren’t used to caught my attention.

That seemed to be the case for Yukinoshita as well.

“In, Col…? Curry?”

Yukinoshita tilted her head with a “what are you talking about?” That word bothered me as well.

“Is that an abbreviation for curry or something?”

Coco-Ichi, In-Col, Cur-Kichi[19]. Putting these words next each other didn’t really seem out of place. Hey hey, this was totally a subject a particular, curry loving voice actor would like; In-Col, that is.

Yuigahama shook her head to our reactions.

“That’s not it! It’s an abbreviation of in… inter? college! I think.”

When she said with an odd lack of confidence, Yukinoshita went “aah” and spoke with a look of understanding.

“Intercollegiate; it means between colleges. I believe it was a word that indicated the interaction between numerous colleges…”

As expected of Yukipedia-san. The word was properly documented in your pages, huh? So you abbreviate intercollegiate to In-Col.

“Right, right. So, like, the clubs in college get together with the clubs from other colleges. But if that’s just limited to only college students, it’d be pretty hard to gather a lot of people, see. So what they do is they end up holding different kinds of events. I even hear they call out to a lot of high school students too.”

Yuigahama nonchalantly talked on and on, but she was actually talking about some scary stuff right now… What, did college students only gather at those kind of things? Far from trying to have fun as much as they could, they even went through the trouble of inviting high school students. Oh gosh, that’s so scary. These In-Col clubs seemed like they’d be full of scummy men and sluts (prejudice). Did Yuigahama go to one of those too?

A retreating, disgusted look may have shown on my face. Heck, my “ugh” voice probably slipped out too.

When she noticed, Yuigahama’s face turned red and she tried to make an excuse in a panic.

“I-I’ve never gone to one before, okay! I only heard about it from girls at other schools!”

When I directed a doubtful gaze at Yuigahama, unable to believe in her outburst, Yuigahama gently looked away. She then added to her words with a very thin voice.

“It’s kind of scary, going to a place like that anyway…”

Well, it’s not like you didn’t have to go, really. There were probably people who needlessly worried if they heard things like that anyway. Thanks to venting out my hatred for the things related to the In-Col clubs, my mood felt just a little better. Well, if what they did there was just to gather people, then they might be useful as references.

“What kind of things did they do at those events?”

When I asked her, Yuigahama went “umm”, thinking and thinking as she answered.

“For example, if it was the tennis club, then they’d hold a reaaaaally easy tennis tournament to welcome the beginners, or a bowling tournament, or even a barbeque.”

“Bowling… Eh? What club was this again?”

“Um, tennis like I said.”

Why did the tennis club need to go bowling too…? Were they required to train their wrists so they could make magic shots or something…?

It’s just like I thought, these in-Col clubs were really scary.

Ignoring my shuddering, Yuigahama continued her explanation.

“So see, we could hold a judo tournament for fun. We can have the judo club members participate in it too, but in a reaaaaally easy way.”

I see, for fun, huh?

If it’s judo for fun, then it might actually attract the guys who’d find it interesting. Furthermore, by having the judo members ease up, then we could avoid the disparity of strength from showing too.

Surprisingly, it could work.

At the same time I was convinced, Yukinoshita was settling on it with simulations. She was nodding her head up and down. But those head movements stopped.

“Would the school give us permission…?”

It looked like she didn’t have any qualms regarding the suggestion itself. Instead, she was worried about the means. But that was probably an unnecessary concern.

“It shouldn’t be a problem, right? This school’s pretty lax with the clubs.”

This of course applies to the Service Club since we were always involved in incomprehensible, mysterious, game-like activities.

Besides, the proper clubs had those kinds of activities approved as well. Like the tea ceremony club for example. They often hosted small events where they invited outsiders to participate.

Yukinoshita showed that she understood what I was getting at, but her strict expression didn’t loosen up.

“I’m sure soliciting new members won’t be a problem… It’s just the people who come out to have fun would ultimately end up quitting, right?”

“…Probably.”

“Probably, huh…?”

Yuigahama showed a stunned face to my simple answer.

However, even so, it was still simple. The very reason for that was because that answer was already anticipating what followed. If it was a club where even the members who joined as early as the entrance ceremony had left, then it was all the easier for those who were new to do so as well. We had to think up measures to prevent that.

“That’s why we’ll have to simultaneously change their environment as well.”

What exactly that alluded to, without mentioning any further, Yukinoshita understood.

“So we’ll have to remove that senpai.”

Correct. I responded with my agreement.

As long the source of everything wasn’t removed, this problem would continue to loop. Worse, if the club’s infamy swept throughout the school, there wouldn’t be a single person who’d want to approach the judo club.

The answer was as clear as day. But Yuigahama looked troubled as if there was a particular issue that bothered her.

“But the judo members, rather, the president didn’t seem like he’d cooperate with us…”

“Certainly, he did seem to come off as admiring him…”

“That’s not what you call admiration, but blind fath.”

To Shiroyama, that blind faith was likely not directed towards his senpai as an individual. It appeared to be more towards the concepts of the hierarchical relationship and camaraderie. He was acknowledging the fact that unfairness was a part of life.

We learned in history class just how difficult it was to toss aside your beliefs. Therefore, it’d be better to assume that he wouldn’t be able to cooperate with us. In truth, Shiroyama himself didn’t present us the option of choosing to eliminate that senpai.

“A way to get rid of him without the help of the judo club…”

When I murmured, Yukinoshita slowly closed her eyes.

In contrast, Yuigahama leaned against her chair, rocking back and forth while gazing at the ceiling.

From there, her neck returned to her original position. She then flicked a finger up and opened her mouth.

“Maybe we can talk to the other teachers or even people from the Board of Education!”

“The school probably won’t want the problems getting out to the public.”

As far as our school was concerned, it was a college prep school. If a problem sprung up with the way the clubs were led, then it was a serious matter. Even if the problem was reported to those at the top, at most they’d conduct an official investigation. But through enough persistence that there weren’t any problems, it would be announced that the issues were external and it would be postponed indefinitely.

Yukinoshita was finding it difficult to agree with the plan as well and made a slightly sour face.

“I suppose. It’s likely they’ll go as far as giving the advisor a verbal warning.”

“At worst, the judo club will be at fault and their activities will be suspended.”

Also, there was the possibility that it wouldn’t be a problem in the first place. If they decreed that it was within the acceptable bounds of general leadership, then it would have the opposite effect. It could be as bad as them giving the official approval.

As long these were activities involved in martial arts, there was the assumption that some dangers were existed. On top of that, with leadership that worked to keep things as safe as possible, there were cases where that ruling would oddly have clashing guidelines in regards to us amateurs and the experts.

In that case, it would be better to avoid playing with dangerous gambles.

“The only thing we can do is to have the senpai leave willfully, huh…”

Without considering the uncertain factors, if you were to choose the best method, then there was nothing else but this.

There wasn’t, but Yuigahama and Yukinoshita together made questionable faces.

“But he won’t listen to outsiders, right?”

“Our only choice is to bring along someone with a higher position than both the senpai and the advisor. That is, if we can.”

Yuigahama made a slightly baffled smile while Yukinoshita made one mingled with resignation. Yukinoshita probably added a hint of irony when she said that, but in reality, that was probably the only thing we could do.

“In that case, guess we better get someone…”

“Huh?”

Yuigahama’s eyes widened. On the other hand, Yukinoshita looking like she took a step back sent me a dubious stare.

“For someone who has absolutely no friends, let alone acquaintances, you have something in mind?”

You only needed to say the last part just now. Why does this girl always have to include weird prefaces like that? Well, it's not like she was wrong though.

I spoke my words while gradually getting my thoughts in order.

"If it's something in mind, then I do. Rather, I'll make one now. In fact, for that to happen, we need to do the event."

"Are you planning on calling someone to the event? Then again, like who?"

Yuigahama asked me with a lot of interest while leaning forward. When an unpleasant smile floated on my face, I voiced the answer I had finished adjusting.

"In the world, he was the one and most established outsider, the fellow called society."

When I finished speaking, Yuigahama let out a "hoee" voice that I had no clue whether she had understood or not. Was that a bit too hard for her…?

But Yukinoshita made a smile looking satisfied.

"So in the end, he's not an acquaintance of yours."

…That's right. It was just a one-sided relationship on my end as the other party didn't know a thing about me.

× × ×

Starting the next day, we began working towards holding the event.

The first thing was an explanation to Shiroyama and the others regarding everything about the judo club. This part wasn't particularly difficult. "To attract new applicants, we'll be doing something flashy that'll garner attention". Using this as a preface to plan, they took it in rather easily.

But the underlying plan beneath it wasn't touched upon in the least. It would've been a hassle if they went up in arms against it. Regardless of what our intentions were, what we were ultimately aiming for was for the senpai to leave willfully. So there wasn't a need to go through the trouble and explain.

After the explanation to the judo club were the negotiations on the school side.

In regards to the judo tournament, it would be held publicly on campus, accepting entries for participation. That being the case, we should expect to be asked about one or two of the circumstances. Having the school interrupt the event halfway through would be irritating, so it'd be easier to relay the story to them beforehand.

The negotiations started off with the judo club advisor. Or so I said, but we weren't the ones that would be doing it. The explanation that this was just a demonstration to attract new members was left to Shiroyama.

Though he may have been an advisor in name, he was seemingly aware of the recent departure of members and we were able to get permission without issue. For

the time being, we were requested to hold the event with utmost safety, but that was cleared as well with the entire judo club being present.

We already had the venue and the dojo so we didn't have to worry about those.

So far, so good.

What's left was to gather participants.

Since I had to participate myself, I had to find members as well, but first and foremost, I had to secure enough participants that would allow us to at least hold the event.

For now, Yukinoshita created the printouts outlining the details of the tournament and after printing those out, with the help of the judo club, we posted them at various places.

But using this to inform people wasn't something you could expect a lot from. Even the orchestra club or the tea ceremony club didn't see much of a turnout from students despite using flyers and notices.

Those events typically saw a gathering of people who were brought in from personal connections more often than not.

And speaking of connections, Yukinoshita and I were pretty much out of the question and it didn't look like we could expect anything from the already weakened community of the judo club. There was Yuigahama, but her personal connections alone probably weren't enough to hold the tournament.

If that's how it was, then we needed to grope for a much more effective, efficient means of soliciting people.

It was the one component that would attract the most attention.

The answer was the casting.

Of course, plenty of the details were questionable, but in this case in particular, as long nothing was asked about the novelty of the judo tournament, then we needed to attract attention with something else.

As luck would have it, we happened to have some knowledge of someone who had the greatest ability to attraction attention in this school.

Yuigahama and I, well, Yuigahama would be handling those negotiations.

As usual, the class of 2-F during lunch was noisy. It was because summer vacation was right at our doorsteps that lunch was buoyant.

Even I had found myself remaining in the class, not bothering to go outside as of late.

The reason was all so we could book the new challenger, Hayama Hayato, for Sobu High's judo tournament, the "S1 Grand Prix". By the way, I was the one who made arbitrarily made that name up.

Hayama was a man whose unexpected participation would cause the gathering of a gallery; evident in the case a while back when we had a simple mock tennis match. If we announced things beforehand of his participation, then we could expect a bigger gathering of people than before. He was an essential casting that must be secured.

Or so I said, but the one who was handling the negotiations was Yuigahama and not me.

"Mmkay, I'll try talking about it to him."

After buying some lunch bread and a brief meeting with Yuigahama, she went back to the group she belonged to in high spirits.

As I watched her go off, I sat at my seat.

Now then, from this point on, I'll watch them as attentively as possible and eavesdrop while having my lunchtime.

I had to make sure I could follow up on Yuigahama if she was at a loss at how to explain things. That too was a high hurdle in itself, but still.

As I was straining my ears, Yuigahama didn't waste a second and brought up the topic.

"Ah, that reminds me. I hear the judo club's going to host a tournament soon."

"Uh huuuh."

Eating bread without the slightest hint of interest was Miura. Despite having zero interest on the subject, she was still responding for the most part, so she might've been just a slightly nice person.

Still, how she was holding bread in one hand and her cellphone in the other, it put me on edge as to whether she would mistake her bread eating hand and bite her cellphone instead. Let's stop playing with our phones during lunch, okay? Not to mention you're doing it while eating with others. Only loners fiddle with their phones during lunch, okay?

Unperturbed by Miura's attitude, Yuigahama continued the conversation further.

"Like, like, they'll decide on who's the strongest at school, or something?"

"Aah, speaking of which, I did see that on the flyer."

Immediately jumping into the conversation was Hayama. As you'd expect, Hayama made sure to listen to what other people were saying and behave accordingly so he could regulate his surroundings. Yuigahama may have been aiming for this. She quickly redirected the conversation towards Hayama.

"Hayato-kun, you look like you'd be into that, why not try participating?"

What the, talk about a careless way to invite him… Hayama didn't look anything like that all…

“Eh? I-Is that how you see me?”

Oh, see. I totally knew it. He’s sort of confused now. Hayama was established as someone who was refreshing and judo’s image was completely opposite. Obviously, I wasn’t the only one who had thought that.

“Doesn’t suit ya at aaall, Hayato-kun, like judo, no waaay!”

Tobe was laughing out loud. Laughing along with him was Yamato and Oooka.

There, Yuigahama made her move.

“Ah, how about Tobecchi too? You seem like you’d be strong, not that I’d know. Why don’t you try doing it together with Hayato-kun? It’s a team tournament of threes anyway.”

“Eh… Naaah, judo’s just a bit…”

Fumu. So it was a strategy to remove the obstacles around Hayama, huh? Seemingly, it wasn’t that Yuigahama started the conversation without a plan; instead, she was being daring by mentioning absurd things in a way that would easily sweep Tobe into participating… Probably. No, that might be wrong. I get the feeling she’d say that kind of stuff regardless.

Just how far did she plan, I wasn’t sure. It was then a person who couldn’t be calculated reacted with a twitch.

“…Doing it, together? D-Doing judo…? That sounds great!”

Ebina-san reacted slowly in time, as if the words from earlier were weighing on her mind.

“Ebina. Here, tissues.”

Miura threw tissues at Ebina-san whose nose was dripping at this moment. While thanking her, Ebina-san placed the issue against her nose, but still fervently continued on.

“Great! Judo’s great!”

“Naah, judo’s just a bit… Something I’m a little confident in, ya know…”

When Ebina-san gave a thumbs up, for some reason, Tobe suddenly began to vouch for judo. The nuance in his words was oddly different from earlier… Japanese sure was difficult, huh…

“A-Are the boys going to be grappling each other when they fall? Who will!? Which Hikitani-kun will be doing the falling!?”

Stop calling my name please… Because I felt a sharp stare, I averted my eyes in a panic. In the time my eyes were averted, the negotiations regarding their participation continued steadily.

When I turned back towards them with shivers, Tobe began to overflow with motivation and tapped Hayama’s back.

“Let’s do this, Hayato-kun!”

“Mm. Well, we don’t get too many opportunities like this after all.”

With Yuigahama and Tobe encouraging him in succession to participate, Hayama couldn’t refuse them as you’d expect and was gradually leaning towards entering.

Was this also the fate of those who were in possession of THE ZONE? If they were asked to build the atmosphere, then this time, he was requested to act without destroying it.

There, the final push was added.

“If Hayato’s going to enter, I guess I’ll go and watch?”

When Miura who had absolute no interest up until that point spoke, Hayama seemingly made his decision.

“Okay, I guess I’ll participate.”

Hayama made a refreshing smile and answered.

With this, our objective was achieved. Now once we made Hayama’s participation known through word of mouth, then the gallery of people would increase and if we increased the scale, then we’d also see a rise in participants who’d want to enter.

“Alright, we should enter too…”

“Right on.”

As if the ripple effect began to take place, Yamato and Oooka declared their entry as well.

It was standard for boys to like martial arts.

No, not like, but to have an interest in. The title of strongest attracting a boy’s attention at least once was certain.

That’s why, as long you had the trigger, it probably wasn’t difficult to have them call forth those felings.

So at this point in time, the Hayama group, Hayama, Tobe, Yamato, and Ooka, was confirmed to be participating in the tournament. Adding to that, since Miura was going to be in the gallery, as far as Sobu High was concerned, that was plenty.

It was then Hayama suddenly realized something.

“But it’s only three people per group huh…”

When he murmured in a small voice, he quietly stood up. From there, he started walking. Somehow, when I trailed the direction in which Hayama’s gaze was facing, oddly enough, my eyes had stopped moving. Huh, he’s coming my way, wasn’t he…?

In the several seconds I was thinking whether there was someone in my vicinity that Hayama had business with, Hayama made it up to me.

Once he stopped his legs, he made a smile that displayed his white teeth.

“Hikitani-kun, do you want to enter the judo tournament with me?”

This guy, what was he blabbering about out of nowhere…?

I could understand his words, but my heart couldn’t. Still, since I was invited, I had to respond back somehow.

“Eh, no, I mean, it wouldn’t work for me. That stuff is just a little out of reach for me.”

If I get invited, for now, I’ll say no. This was the correct response to lip service.

“I see. Well, since Tobe and the other two are in a group of three, I’m kind of the odd one out.”

“Ah, right. Well, I guess so…”

Because he sent me a gaze that was strangely straightforward, I replied back with vague words and Hayama drew back his shoulders.

“So, how about it…? You’re the one who suggested doing things this way, right?”

Haa, so that’s what you’re playing at. So he came over here so he could bring up that time when we broke up in to groups for the workplace tour.

But he was right. I was the one who suggested how to divide Hayama and Tobe into different groups. If he was going to be consistent with that, then that meant he wouldn’t group up with those guys this time as well. That being the case, just like last time, speaking of it being obvious, then it was natural that it would be my turn.

I had no choice, but to accept his proposal. Above all else, losing Hayama’s participation just because of this would inflict a fair amount of damage to us.

“…Though we’ll still need one more person.”

I gave my consent with those words and Hayama made a sudden smile.

“In that case, could you invite one more person?”

“No, I don’t have a single friend to invite.”

No matter how you thought about it, it would be quicker to have Hayama invite someone. I looked at him telling him to do it, but he avoided that as well.

“You have one right? That guy, I mean.”

That guy… I wonder, was there someone like that? I went into thought. I-I see. Totsuka, right!?

Having been convinced, I also spoke up.

“Aah… Him, huh?”

“Right, right, Zaimokuza-kun. He seems pretty strong and this seems like a good opportunity.”

Ah, you meant that…

If that was Hayama’s one and only nomination, then I had to talk to Zaimokuza. Right now, Hayama was an important factor. I needed to follow through with whatever demands he had in order for his wholesome participation in the event. Not much I could do…

When my shoulders dropped in despair, Hayama nodded back as if he saw that as a form of nodding.

“Okay, I’ll leave it to you.”

He left with those words and Hayama went back to his own seat.

Having to team up with Zaimokuza was a real bummer, but as part of the Service Club activities, it was actually convenient. I didn’t factor Hayama as being just a simple attraction mascot, but if he was going to be usable as part of our forces, then that made it better for us.

So far, things had more or less gone according to plan.

Now it was just a matter of how much of the details we could settle on and how the big gamble on the day of the event would go.

× × ×

Just a little sport open to some fun.

The judo tournament began officially with a non-serious preface and surprisingly, the participants and the galleries were gathering.

This period that was right before summer, on the contrary, might’ve been better for us.

After this, we would be spending short of a month away from school life.

Before that, the students seemed to have seen this as moderate sized extracurricular that they could go wild in for the last time.

The judo dojo wasn’t a very big facility. Because of that, people were standing to watch, but it turned out to be a success.

Shiroyama, on standby near the kamiza, gave a sweeping look of the entire room. He looked like the type who wouldn’t show much on his expression, but just this time, he displayed some emotion.

“I didn’t think this much people would come by. You really helped us out, thanks.”

He gave his gratitude, but we had yet to do anything or help anyone.

What we were going to do was from this point on. After we're done, I had the feeling he wouldn't want to give us his thanks anymore.

That's why I didn't touch on it and talked about something different.

"Putting that aside, the senpai's going to stop by today, right?"

"Yeah. As you asked, we made sure to call him. I think he'll be here soon."

We were good if he was going to come. This was the one thing that we had no say in the matter, so we could only rely on Shiroyama. The meager chances of him making his appearance, or in fact, whether he decided to show up or not was the most important point.

It was thanks to Shiroyama that the senpai would be watching the entirety of the tournament from the top. So with that, just what kind of reaction would the senpai have? Just what kind of values he had in regards to judo done for fun, I didn't know.

"Did you mention anything about this?"

"…No. He didn't seem too particularly angry either."

While remembering his exchange with his senpai, Shiroyama spoke word by word in confirmation. So far, it didn't look like his attitude was in opposition to this event.

He was someone who went out of his way to visit the club he had retired from. I had my suspicions that he might've been someone who preferred exclusive groups, but it didn't seem to be at that level.

Well, regardless, the goal of acquiring new members was still present. At the very least, that should've been the thing that was most visible.

"I see. That's fine then. We need to show your senpai just how hard working and how exciting the club is."

"…I guess so."

Shiroyama seemed just a little bashful. But with his face resembling a potato from the start, it was hard to discern that.

"Well, it'd be nice if they can heat things up. I'll see you later."

After stating that to Shiroyama and leaving the kamiza, I headed for the vicinity of the entrance.

A long table was placed there with the purpose of accepting entries for participating teams. Yuigahama happened to be sitting there at that moment as well.

In the back was Yukinoshita writing the tournament brackets on vellum paper.

The total number of participating teams was eight.

There was my team with Hayama and Zaimokuza. Another team was from the judo club. The rest of the teams would be accepted on a first-come-first-serve basis until the cutoff.

If there were too many teams, then we'd lose control of the tournament and worse of all, it'd get boring.

For the time you had fun, the shorter it started to feel for you physically. If so, by making things brief and rich in substance, then they might be able to feel like they're having fun. It was a paradoxical play.

Also, well, you know, since it'd get super cold too, the earlier we could finish was quite blissful in its own way…

"Looks like we're getting closer to starting time, huh?"

I started a conversation with Yuigahama who was fiddling with her cellphone looking bored and without raising her face, she answered.

"Uh huh. I think once Hayato-kun comes, everyone else should too, right?"

I recalled Hayama saying that he was going to get out of his soccer club for a moment. As for Hayama, since we were on the same team, there wasn't an issue with our entry and we covered Tobe's team as well. It was just a matter of waiting for them to arrive.

I glimpsed at the tournament brackets.

Yukinoshita was filling them in with the team names. Our team was on the opposite end of the judo club.

With this, we wouldn't have to face them until the finals.

"Hikigaya-kun."

Noticing that I was behind her, Yukinoshita spoke to me without turning around.

"Hm?"

"For now, I put both of you on opposite ends just like you said, but if you guys don't advance all the way, it won't go as planned in the end, right?"

"…Well, I imagine so."

"Once again with another careless plan…"

Yukinoshita went "haa" as she sighed with astonishment. But it wasn't like I was doing this without anything in mind.

"If we lose, then we can just group up during the exhibition. Even so, we'll make it succeed. Just because how we go about it changes doesn't mean what we need to do does."

"I suppose… Regardless of how it goes, the aftertaste will still be bad."

After the last squeak of the marker, Yukinoshita finally turned around. She then made a pleasant smile.

“However, while it may not be me personally, I wouldn’t be too pleased if my team were to lose pathetically. If you’re going to lose, I want you to at least do so gracefully.”

“Quit talking under the assumption that we’re going to lose…”

My motivation just before the match went up into smokes. Why was it that whenever she says these kinds of things, she’d smile?

Well, but still, it’s true that it was fine to lose.

More than that, starting this event with the senpai coming made eighty percent of the plan.

While it was certain this event was public relations for acquiring new members, that was just one part of the plan.

The other part of the plan was the removal of the senpai.

What was necessary was the destruction of the senpai’s authority. If we could damage him to the point that it would be hard for him to show up at school, then that was sufficient.

There were numerous ways to get that done. It’s just that it’s highly probably the judo club wouldn’t go entirely unaffected after the job was done, so we had to put that into consideration as well.

The smartest choice in this situation was to have the senpai participate in the tournament and beat him at his own game.

But that wasn’t a very realistic option.

After all, the senpai entered college on a sports recommendation. It’s better to assume an amateur wouldn’t be able to win against him. If that’s the case, then it came down to settling for the second best option.

“It’s almost time it seems…”

Yukinoshita checked the clock and spoke. Lured by her, I looked at the clock as well and it was time.

As if trying to match that, the entrance grew noisy.

It looked like Hayama and company had arrived.

“I’m totally hyped up for this!”

I could hear Tobe’s loud voice. When I looked, Miura and Ebina-san and company along with other groups of people were there.

In that group was Hayama looking for me as he quickly jogged in my direction.

“Sorry. Got here late.”

“Nah, just on time.”

I pointed at the clock and Hayama let out a relieved breath.

“Is that so? That’s good then. Also, he arrived as well.”

Ahead where Hayama turned to was a fellow with the appearance of a bear who came down from the mountains into a city making furtive glances.

“Nuun… What is this noisiness?”

With his hand at his jaw, he would occasionally let out suspicious sighs.

“You sure are late.”

When I went to call out to Zaimokuza who refused to take a step inside, he displayed a weary reaction as that of a small animal. But when he realized I was the owner of the voice, his stance gradually loosened.

“Nu, Hachiman, I see… I rushed over here upon your calling and now that I look, what in the name is this?”

“Yeah, tournament. You, athlete, my team.”

“Eh? Wait a second!? Mister Hachiman!?”

He was screaming about not knowing what the heck was going on, but, huh? I never explained it to him? Well, whatever.

“Anyway, let’s get going because the matches are going to start.”

“Hogh, matches?”

Zaimokuza checked left and right while going “nuun, nuun” and placed his eyes on the tournament brackets ahead.

“Fumuu… At the very least, if I could know what kind of match it pertains to… Should it be a duel, then I may be able to do something about it, but…”

“It’s something like that. A Japanese styled duel in fact.”

“No, you’re definitely lying, sushi.

Upon looking, I was pushing Zaimokuza who was beginning to sweat profusely from the back, going into the judo dojo.

On the way, Hayama joined us, helping with pushing Zaimokuza along. This guy’s a good guy. It’s just well, actual good guys wouldn’t be pushing Zaimokuza right now though.

“Let’s get along, Zaimokuza-kun.”

Never forgetting to be refreshing no matter the occasion, Hayama pushed Zaimokuza along while giving him a refreshing greeting.

“Oh. Right…”

In contrast, Zaimokuza was always an sultry, human tropical rainforest. Not giving him a worthwhile answer, Zaimokuza was mumbling “Somethinggashi? Hayama Somethinggashi is here…”

Well, however the situation, our team was gathered.

When I placed my gaze at the reception, Yuigahama was forming a huge circle with her arms. It looked like all the other teams had arrived as well.

From there, I looked at the tournament brackets and Yukinoshita nodded her head and pointed at the wristwratch.

Though it was just a little forced, our preparations were all done.

Lastly, I looked in the direction of the kamiza where Shiroyama was.

Shiroyama didn’t notice I was looking at him. Or so was the case, but it was because Shiroyama was accompanying his senpai from moments ago. In his place, the first year potato duo, Tsukui and Fujino greeted back with a small “osu”.

With this, all the actors were present.

At last, we could determine who was the strongest at Sobu High, the opening of the S1 Grand Prix…

× × ×

The official host of the event, Shiroyama, opened off with an extremely, simple speech.

He spoke with his usual rugged tone, but with a gathered audience that was in high spirits, they applauded with hoorays and cheers.

And then, it was moments before the start of the first match.

It was between the judo club and a bunch of incomprehensible guys.

The judo club safely secured their victory and with their casualness seemingly affecting the following two matches, both the second and third matches reached an outcome in good spirit.

Tobe’s team that was in the second match smoothly advanced to the best of 4. Then again, there were only 8 teams, so we were already the best of 8.

The match schedule proceeded as scheduled and it was finally time for the fourth match.

It was our very first campaign.

After we finished changing into the borrowed judo uniforms, we advanced onwards to the square battlefield.

Along the way, Zaimokuza was groaning the entire time.

“Hachiman… Hear me, what exactly is this…?”

“You’re so insistent. This is judo, damn it.”

When I replied back, Zaimokuza sent me a bitter stare.

“You said earlier that this was a Japanese styled duel…”

“It’s more or less the same. Well, think of it like this. I figured it’d serve as a reference for your novel.”

“Mu… Indeed.”

I ended up blurting out the words that just happened to cross my mind, but surprisingly, Zaimokuza looked convinced, nodding while going “fununu”. Uh, people normally didn’t have that kind of voice when they nodded, you know.

But skillfully, it looked like Zaimokuza would be able to switch into his conspicuous chuunibyou self. Either that, being in front of so many people caused him to get too nervous that he went off the deep end. Looking like he switched gears, he was entered into his Master Swordsman Shogun mode. If he’s like this, then he wouldn’t be bothered by the public’s attention. Once again, another page was added to his black history…

We lined up on top of the tatami floors.

The role of judge was filled by one member of the potatoes, Tsukui? Or was it Fujino? I think they were alternating between the two. I wasn’t too confident on that, but that was probably the case.

When we bowed to each other in accordance with the instructions of the judge, everyone except for the first person to compete moved back. It looked like they had already decided on their team order.

“What should we do about the order?”

This order was tied in with strategy. The rules for this tournament in particular weren’t to defeat everyone one by one, but to secure two wins through round robin.

My question was intended to be for Hayama, but for some reason, Zaimokuza answered instead.

“Fumuu, I shall serve as the vanguard. I will not hand over the honor of being the spearhead.”

“I think that sounds good.”

The humane Hayama settled on Zaimokuza’s abrupt suggestion, connecting with him humanely.

“Okay, I’ll go second. We’ll entrust the general position to Hikitani-kun.”

“Are you sure?”

I wasn’t exactly wearing a hard hat though? I wonder if I should end my sentences with “da je” or something?

“I’m more suited to doing things in a comfortable position. Do your best, Zaimokuza-kun.”

When Hayama smiled and said, he lightly tapped Zaimokuza's back.

"Oh, right, sure."

Just being in contact with Hayama was enough to cause Zaimokuza to be at his wit's end. Streams of sweat were beginning to flow down. What, just how nervous were you? Or could it be that you liked Hayama?

"Sorry, making you guys do this all of a sudden. I'll leave it up to you guys."

"What's this, rather cold of you. Leave it to me."

As I thought how reliable Zaimokuza seemed not knowing why when he gallantly responded, I copied Hayama and lightly tapped Zaimokuza's back. When I did, it was slippery.

…Eh? What the, was this guy an amphibian? Was this sweat? I thought for a second there he was covered in Vaseline or something. Despite all this and still not showing a disgusted face, it made me realize how amazing Hayama-kun was.

When he went out to the tatami, the first match quickly began.

As we watched, Zaimokuza moved unexpectedly fast. Still, his opponent was fairly fast himself as he grabbed ahold of Zaimokuza's sleeve in no time.

But in that instant, the opponent's face distorted into fear and repugnance. He suddenly let go of the sleeve he managed to grab and looked at his hand in fear.

It looked like he had fallen into it… The Zaimokuza swampland…

That opening wasn't missed by Zaimokuza.

He seized the opponent's collar and pulled him over with all his strength.

For their difference in weight, the opponent was easily blown away.

"P-Point?"

The judge announced with a question for some reason.

Even the audience went "o-oooh", sounding fairly mild-mannered. The clapping was weak too.

But even so, a win was a win.

Zaimokuza calmly returned to our side.

"Your thoughts, Hachiman?"

"Yeah, pretty amazing."

Your sweat, that is… Had the times stayed the same, you would've been executed for illegal production of salt. Look, like now, the judo club guys were having a hell of a time wiping away your sweat. Now I was starting to feel sorry for them…

"Okay, next is my time, huh?"

When he said that, Hayama gallantly walked out to the center of the tatami.

In that instant, a burst of fervent clapping occurred. What followed was the Hayama call.

HA-YA-TO (FU!) HA-YA-TO (SOIYA!) The rest being repeated.

Who knows when they revised it, but they even had interjected pauses in there. What, did everyone practice this together?

"Hayatooo!"

Standing out in particular amongst the high pitched cheering voices was Miura. She was waving a fan as she was cheering. Surprisingly, she was one of those follower types, huh? Because earlier, she looked absolutely disinterested in the other matches, waving her fan back and forth while complaining about the heat… Also, this didn't matter, but Tobe's interjections were annoying.

Hayama wasn't timid in the face of those cheering voices at all and he lightly raised his hand in response. He was so composed to the point of being hateful. On the other hand, the opponents were completely taken in by the atmosphere.

The outcome of the match was already decided well before the start of the match.

In reality, the match really did end with an unexpected swiftness.

As soon as the match started, Hayama took the opponent's hand and beautifully did a shoulder thrown.

The loud cheering voices that scattered throughout the judo dojo were directed at Hayama's back as he nonchalantly returned back.

"With this, it's our win."

"I-I guess so…"

To be honest, I felt a bit awkward being included since I didn't do anything, but for the time being, I was glad that we won.

Regardless, Hayama's specs were ridiculously off the charts… Speaking of which, a certain somebody from somewhere beat him in a tennis match, you know? Well, we may have won the match, but we did lose the fight… No, wait a second? I did say match, but that time, I pretty much didn't do anything either. I was able to win without putting in any effort. As I thought, I shouldn't be working in the future.

But even if I didn't plan on working where the future was concerned, right now, there was something I had to do.

"There's still some time before the next match. Kill some time or something."

After telling Hayama and Zaimokuza that, I left the area.

From there, I headed for the kamiza.

Other matches were still in progress as of now. Right now, the semifinal with Tobe's group and the judo club should be taking place. Hayama would probably

watch Tobe's match with Miura and the others while Zaimokuza would have no place to be, ultimately becoming a Ksitigarbha.

There, an individual at the kamiza was watching that match. Except with just a look of boredom.

It was the judo club's senpai. I didn't know his name. Nor did I have any interest in knowing. We didn't a firsthand relationship nor did I consider him my senpai, but regardless, I would still call him one.

"Senpai."

Making it up the kamiza, I stood next to him and sparked up a conversation.

When I did, the senpai turned my way annoyingly. Because it was a face he wasn't familiar with, he looked momentarily confused, but he quickly covered that up and replied with crude words.

"Sup."

After confirming that he had a response, I continued talking.

"How is it? The judo club's new effort."

"…Let's see. Doesn't seem bad, eh? Being able to goof around like this is during high school after all."

The senpai spoke while flapping his fan back and forth as if trying to fill up the space. I could hear him muddling those words one by one.

I see, so he was this kind of person who talked like this, huh? When I finished affirming that the impression from when I saw him during that practice didn't change from the other day, I opened my mouth.

"I suppose so… We consulted with Shiroyama about this, but we thought this kind of playing around was important, so that's why we gathered people."

When I said that, the senpai stared at me and made two, three blinks.

"…Aah, so you went through the trouble of gathering people? But if all you do is play around, it won't register with your body, so don't go spoiling Shiroyama, you hear? It's because the world is much harsher than you guys believe it to be. If you don't practice and study properly now, you won't get anywhere."

The words the senpai spoke as he closed his fan with a smack made me want to blow them off to which I refrained. Instead, I said something in place of that.

"Yes. Ah, that's right. Senpai, would you like to have one match?"

"…Eh? Y-Yeah… I'll think about it."

"Whenever you feel like it, I'll be up for it."

I left the kamiza with those words. I could feel a sticky, puzzled glare as if there was something irritating about my response, but I shook that off and walked on.

It was almost time for our match. Though, there really wasn't a meaning in me being there since those two were going to win anyway.

"…What did you talk to senpai about?"

Apparently I was seen. Since he was at the kamiza too, Shiroyama was concerned about the senpai.

"Nothing much. I was just arranging a little act, that's all."

"Act?"

Shiroyama's slightly stuffed potato face rotated to the side.

"Yeah, that's right. Also, I'll let you know as well. This is regarding the finals, but I'll be fighting against the senpai, so act as the judge for me."

"I don't mind, but…"

"Okay, the act. Counting on you."

"Hm?"

Shiroyama had a puzzled face and titled his head.

× × ×

In the end, I didn't get my turn in the semifinal. If there was one thing I did, then it was giving a mop to the judo club after the match to wipe up Zaimokuza's sweat.

We advanced to the finals with Zaimokuza and Hayama securing two wins. Zaimokuza's slippery defense and Hayama's shoulder throw were once again the winning moves. Ultimately, we had made it up to the finals without me ever having done a thing.

Our opponent in the final was the team that destroyed Tobe's team. Just when did they lose anyway?

By the way, since Shiroyama was the president, as a handicap, it was decided he wouldn't be participating in the tournament. The one who appeared in the tournament was Tsukui, Fujio, and one more person I had no idea who he was or his name so I went ahead and called him Yam.

As I watched the new three potato brothers warming up, we began to get ready for the finals as well.

When I did, having only watched from afar until now was Yuigahama and Yukinoshita briskly walking our way.

"Do you guys need something? You normally try not to talk to someone before a match out of consideration."

When I said that, Yukinoshita spoke with a cool voice, unaffected by the enthusiasm of the judo club.

"In that case, you must be in a match all year round."

“More or less. So, what’s up?”

I joked with Yukinoshita’s sarcasm and Yuigahama eventually raised her hand and answered.

“We just thought we’d cheer you on for the last match.”

“Aah. Thanks for that. That is, if I even get a turn.”

Saying that, I looked at Zaimokuza and Hayama. Surprisingly, with those two, we just might end up winning.

“You should. Otherwise, nothing will be solved.”

As if seeing through me, Yukinoshita spoke. In actuality, I was a little suspicious of how far Yukinoshita read into it, but when she said something, it was oddly persuasive so it was hard to respond. True enough, things wouldn’t end with just this.

“…I guess so.”

“Right, right! For the sake of the judo club, do your best!”

Yuigahama optimistically pushed her arms out. I wasn’t feeling in the mood to accompany her festive mood.

“It’s not like I’m doing it for their sake or anything.”

“Huh?”

Her surprised expression was asking nothing but “then whose sake is it for?” but before I could answer, it was time for the match.

× × ×The finals were brewed a storm starting from the first match.

It was five seconds following the start of the match after their mutual bows.

“Defuh.”

Along the sound of a violent thump was a subdued voice that resembled hitting a wall in Dragon Quest that could be heard.

When I focused again on trying to determine what had happened, someone resembling a sea lion that was launched in the air was on the floor. It looked like Zaimokuza was thrown. He wasn’t moving an inch.

The point was loudly announced.

“For that Zaimokuza, to lose…”

Unbelievable. For that Zaimokuza who was proud of his unparalleled strength to lose so easily… So he was in the Yamcha position all along.

“I imagine the judo club is used to that kind of competition.”

At some point, Yukinoshita had already been sitting next to me in seiza and she explained for me.

“Kuh, the gooeyness backfired, huh!?”

“Gross…”

Yuigahama who was hugging her knees as she was sitting provided an additional mental attack. It’s not good to kick a dead body.

Zaimokuza, collapsed and defeated on the floor, was sluggishly pulled away. After they moved Zaimokuza who completely damp like a wet sponge, it was like the wake of a crawling slug. He was thrown outside the premises.

In that time, the interior of the dojo was growing noisy. Zaimokuza getting destroyed instantly in gaudy fashion appeared to be sensational. But when the next match was ready to go, the burst of unknown cheering voices and the commotion began to die down.

The impact of the first match was overshadowed by the Hayama call as well.

These were the finals and also a battle that we definitely couldn’t lose. The reason why was because unlike the battles where you definitely couldn’t lose with the scoreless draws that were typically losses, we really couldn’t afford to lose here. Losing the second match here would make us the losers.

All the more so when the audience was livening things up. Ebina-san was grinning the entire time from start to finish, cheering with a loud voice. If Hayama won, then Miura just might strip… It was that kind of excitement that the boys were made to anticipate. Also, Tobe was annoying.

“Hikitani-kun.”

After he stood up, Hayama’s speaking voice could still be heard even in this torrent of cheering voices.

“Ah?”

“You should probably warm up.”

By the time he finished his words, Hayama was already walking forward. How he stayed humble while haughtily declaring his win to the point of being detestable truly fit him. Although it made me a little irritated, since he was going to win, I couldn’t say much.

From there, the Hayama commotion that threw the audience into a whirlpool of chaos reached its apex when Hayama stepped into the ring.

Despite that, just when I thought how Ebina-san was quiet all of a sudden, it turned out she was sleeping on Miura’s lap covered with a wet handkerchief. What, what did she see? What came to mind…?

At last, Hayama and his opponent faced each other.

At that moment, the doors to the judo burst open.

“Aah~! I finally found yooou~. Hayama-senpaaai~, please come to cluuub~.”

It was an idiotic voice that wasn't perturbed in the least by tension in the judo dojo. When I looked, it was a girl student wearing a pink jersey with flaxen hair that was shoulder length. She completely ignored the mood around her and walked directly up to Hayama.

In spite of everyone being dumbfounded, she didn't pay any attention.

After seeing that girl, Hayama actually shook for once.

"I-Iroha…"

"Because Hayama-senpai isn't there, the first years don't have a clue what to do, you knooow."

"Ah, right. No, right now's a bit."

Hayama tried to argue back with her, but that Iroha-chan or whatever wasn't listening at all and gripped the sleeve of Hayama's uniform.

Eh, who's this girl…?

Or so I thought until Tobe in the audience stood up and called out.

"My baaad, Irohasu. I'll go back, so spare Hayato-kun will ya?"

"Ah, you're fine where you are, Tobe-senpai."

With a smiling, graceful rejection, Tobe could only say "r-right…" and sat back down.

"Hayama and Tobe's acquaintance?"

I looked at Yukinoshita and Yuigahama and asked. Yukinoshita didn't seem to know and shook her head, but Yuigahama seemed to have an idea.

"Aah, it's Iroha-chan. She's the first year manager for the soccer club."

Hoh, Isshiki Iroha. Tch, I remembered her. As a dangerous creature, that is.

…That's bad. That girl was undoubtedly bad. My ghost was whispering to me to be careful of those beautiful, airy and fluffy type of girls.

When that cute soccer manager who reeked of danger called Isshiki grabbed Hayama, she tried to pull him along.

It was as if this was the selfishness of a princess that no one could interrupt it.

"Would it be better to stop them for now?"

Amongst all of us, the only person seemingly capable of acting was just Yukinoshita. But she checked with me first, unsure of how to proceed.

"No, it should be fine if we just leave them alone."

"Is that so?"

Though Yukinoshita stated dubiously, but you know missy, you clearly looked like you weren't going to get up from your seiza, were you…?

But, well, it wasn't an issue if the ice queen didn't move from the princess's tomfoolery. That's because there was one more other that was going to.

"Hey, seriously, you…"

Miura stood up like the hot heat waves of midsummer.

"Hayato's like really busy right now, can't you see?"

It was a tone that burned the earlobes of those who listened, but, to the zephyr princess, it didn't seem to have an effect.

"Eeeh~? Buuut, club's a real mess right nooow…"

"Haa?"

When Isshiki made a rebuttal with a breezy voice, it made Miura even hotter.

"N-Now, now."

Hayama interjected knowing that it was really bad and tried to calm Miura down. When he did, Isshiki was twitching while snugly gripping the hems of her skirt behind Hayama's back.

That small animal like gesture made Miura even more upset. When she faced downwards, she let out a deep breath like the pumping of a pair of pillows.

"…Hayato, you can go ahead on to the club. I have a little talking to do with this girl."

"Eh?"

Hayama let out a nervous voice and stiffened up.

What his stare was directed at was Miura's raised face.

"Try your best at club, okay?♪"

She was grinning with a smile, very likely the first and best smile I had seen Miura make.

From there, Miura dragged Isshiki along with her. Isshiki screamed "Hayama-senpaaai" that resembled a shriek of the sort to which Miura completely ignored and continued on.

Hayama chased after them, understanding that wasn't something he could leave alone.

"Sorry! Hikitani-kun! I'll be back in a bit!"

As he said that while clapping his hands together, Hayama ran off.

Uh, I was absolutely sure you wouldn't be able to come back right away… That outside scuffle probably was going to attract everyone's attention at this rate…

Everyone was wondering what the commotion was about.

He was a man that was absolutely unreliable when we needed him… But, well, let's just say good on him for taking us all the way to finals.

So the remaining problem was how we were going to get past this second match.

"W-What's going to happen now?"

Still sitting as she was earlier, Yuigahama scooted over to me.

"Lose by default? Er, if we move up, then it'd be my turn…"

"If that happens, then won't the last match be lost by default too?"

Certainly, it was as Yuigahama said. What's supposed to happen in this kind of situation? I tilted my neck and a calm voice sprung up from nearby.

"Losing by default won't happen."

Oh, that's Yukipedia-san for you. She knew the rules of judo in detail.

"It's not a problem if I go out instead."

Having said that, Yukinoshita quietly stood up. No, you're trying to do things your own way too much…

"No, that doesn't seem like it would fly."

"That's right! A girl can't be participating in that."

We both tried to stop her, but Yukinoshita wasn't listening.

"I don't recall there being any restrictions on who could participate. It's not an official tournament either. No one should mind, right?"

"That's not it! You can't! Absolutely not!"

Opposing her logic head-on was Yuigahama with an emotional outburst and Yukinoshita, as expected, was hesitating.

Well, it wasn't necessary to have Yukinoshita force herself to participate.

The opponents may be members of the judo club, but they looked like first years, whether it be the Chinese yam or the Japanese yam, even I might be able to manage something. When I took a confirming glance, the three potatoes were whispering sneakily to each other secretly. When they looked at Yukinoshita, their cheers were slightly blushed.

Hoho, a bit cheeky for a bunch of potatoes, eh?

"I'll go first. Hayama might come back by then."

The possibility wasn't high, but that was probably the best plan for now.

After saying that, the moment I stood up, Yukinoshita pulled down on my sleeve with utmost force. My neck whipped backwards.

"Fueh, ouch… W-What might be the matter?"

When I asked her while coughing violently from the unexpected whiplash, Yukinoshita looked at me with calm, rather, straightforward eyes.

“Is there any meaning in that?”

“Haa?”

On the contrary, I wanted to ask that of her question. When I inquired with an irritated expression, Yukinoshita persuaded me with a matter-of-fact tone.

“The plan you thought up may be full of holes, but didn’t you prepare a lot of things to lure out that senpai after this?”

“……”

True enough, she was right. These past few days, this event, this place, and this stage were all planned to bring out that senpai and make him fall. To toss aside all that effort up until now would be a very foolish decision.

It’s because it was the ultimate stage that the plan would have the greatest effect. Amongst the numerous available methods, opting for the plan with the greatest possibilities of success would mean having Yukinoshita participate here.

In addition to the chilly stare that woke up my mind, Yukinoshita added further, as if she was dumping cold water on top of me.

“Besides, your concerns aren’t necessary.”

She sized up the opponent that would face her with a determined smile.

“In short, all I need to do is avoid letting him get in contact with me, right?”

“That’s the problem…!? At the very least, at least change your clothes, okay?”

Having already given up on persuading Yukinoshita, Yuigahama spoke in tears. When she did, Yukinoshita nodded her head as if the thought crossed her mind.

“…That’s true.”

“Okay, let’s go!”

Once that was decided, Yuigahama acted quickly. The moment she grabbed Yukinoshita’s hand, they scuttled off, and within ten minutes, they came back.

Yuigahama was panting in exhaustion with her clothes in a mess for some reason. On the other hand, Yukinoshita was looking crisp.

Yukinoshita was wearing a navy blue hakama over her padded undershirt. Her hair was up and tied together. On top of that, she had the same bobtail from the other day.

“What’s with the getup…?”

“We borrowed it from the girls’ kendo club!”

Yuigahama’s voice was rather energetic despite her heavy breathing.

Yukinoshita twisted her body, stretched, and straightened her collar as she checked her appearance.

“Now, shall we get started?”

When she said that, she walked out to the center of the ring.

The audience who watched the development gave applause to Yukinoshita’s dignified still appearance.

The judge Shiroyama tilted his head not understanding what was going on. It was after our eyes met that he thought for a little bit before nodding his head.

Apparently, he interpreted this to be the “act”. No, this was something else…

Starting from the top, it was the second match, Yukinoshita against the purple yam or was it the sweet potato? Both contenders stood at their positions and looked at each other. Yukinoshita was already winning from just the glints in their eyes.

Simultaneously, the flag was flung along with “begin” yelled out by the voice.

In that instant, the opponent moved with a snap. The opponent was a girl. If he could at least grab a hold of her, then he could throw her with all of his strength and win. That was probably his contrived strategy.

But that was only if we were talking about any normal girl.

Just who did you think you're making enemies with? It was Yukinoshita Yukino. If it was just her specs alone, then she was at the top of the entire prefecture. She excelled in her resourcefulness, her strategies, her bravery, and her features with her personality collected and viciously unjust. To add to that, she was invincible and peerless as well as the ultimate sore loser. When it came to matches, she was the provisional strongest.

The small fry wouldn't be allowed to even come in contact with her.

As reality had it, Yukinoshita didn't even give him the chance to touch the sleeve of her uniform.

She would read her opponents exhalation, anticipate his inhalation of air, and anticipate the movement of his legs. What remained was to insert the most optimal move in relation to her conforming to the movements she had predicted. With dancing footwork and cutting agility, she controlled her opponent's actions like that of a matador.

The designated location was the empty space.

By the time I had confirmed with my eyes, the outcome had already been decided.

There was a loud thumping noise and after that, even Yukinoshita's exhaled breath had reached my ears.

Not a single person from the audience could make a sound. It was an abnormal space.

The sounds that were born in that space were the waving of a flag and the voice that declared the winner.

The audience that witnessed a rare display of fine skill broke into cheers and applause. Those cheering voices arranged a flowery path that Yukinoshita passed through back to the place where we were sitting.

Yuigahama jumped at her.

"Wow, that was amazing! You were so cool!"

"Hey… So stuffy."

While she was complaining, she didn't pull away from her. Even Yukinoshita couldn't get out of this one. The way she looked was pleasant, but in fact, what she managed to pull off wasn't.

She threw a person from just defensive body movements alone… What the heck was that? Was she Kenichi's master?

She really did go and win without letting him lay a single finger on her.

"You're really unbelievable."

When I said that, Yukinoshita made a teasing smile.

“Yes, I suppose so. For an opening performance, might I have heated it up just a tad too much?”

“I don’t think that kind of teasing’s very good, you know.”

Before heading to the ring, I did one last big stretch.

“Alright, time to go…”

They were supposed to have been words for myself, but voices responded to them.

“Go get him!”

“Keep yourself together.”

Were you guys my mothers or something?

× × ×

It was the long awaited final match. This festival, ridiculously dubbed as the S1 Grand Prix, would end with this match.

The audience was already becoming small.

Well, quite frankly, they were redundant. It was like the extra story that came with the original. Having borne witness to Hayama’s participation and his scene of carnage along with Yukinoshita’s acrobatics, the audience should’ve been mostly satisfied.

That’s why from this point on, I’d be doing things my way. I had prepared a lot of things for this. So they should allow me to be at least this selfish.

When I went directly to the center of the ring, my opponent was just about to come my way. I forgot whether it was Tsukui or Fujino, but I faced him, extended my hand out, and stopped him.

I then turned towards the kamiza and called out.

“Senpai, how about it?”

Thinking that he really wouldn’t be called out, the senpai looked at me twice. The laws were already broken from the change in members from the earlier match. The limitations of the rules no longer existed.

That’s why the only thing stopping him was shame.

This entertainment was to the school, originally, something that belonged to the outsiders which also pulled the current judo athletes. He should have the feelings of shame towards that.

But if you directed the pointer in the opposite direction, then he had no choice but to step forward.

On this stage of the finals and in front of the excited audience, even if he was called out, he didn’t have the courage to respond. He should have the feelings of shame towards that.

What outweighed the other; only the person in question could know.

But I was confident. The senpai would definitely choose to protect the shame of the latter.

As the audience was watching with bated breath, the senpai sluggishly stood up. He then grabbed his judo uniform and began to change into it.

His motions caused the audience to go “ooh!” with raised voices filled with anticipation.

On the other hand, the judge performed by Shiroyama was expressionless.

“…Senpai’s strong, you know.”

“I bet he is. That’s why I was getting this match hyped up.”

While checking over my sash, collars, and sleeves, I answered and Shiroyama tilted his head in confusion.

Contrary to how Shiroyama looked, he wasn’t clueless. By not being clueless, he should’ve been thinking about the meaning of my words. In reality, before approaching us for a consultation, he had searched for possibilities himself leading him to settle for a prudent and proper judgment.

That’s why in regards to that point, I could expect that much.

Then again, since he only stopped short of not being clueless as well, though he may be able to read what’s behind the scenes, he wouldn’t go any further than that.

Just one strategic move was prepared. Well, it’s something like insurance. If I settled things without having to use it, that was fine.

As you’d expect, the senpai was used to it and promptly changed into his unform and entered the ring. He motioned the first years away with his hand and arrived at the position in the direct center that faced me.

The senpai sized me up with a stare that was lit by anger and shame. But, when it came to insight, I wouldn’t lose. I could see the things that deprecated no matter how brilliant it was.

It was because of that that I could see the senpai quite a bit.

“Both opponents, bow… Begin!”

Shiroyama’s gave his command with a deep tone.

From the onset, both the senpai and I took gradual steps to measure our distance, repeatedly closing in and retreating back. He didn’t do anything like jumping in hotheadedly. Of course, I didn’t as well. When you say judo, you think ukemi. Even in class, I practiced nothing but ukemi by myself the entire time.

Each and every day, ukemi.

I was so adamant on ukemi that even my life was ukemi.

Even if I went at the senpai with honesty, I was aware that I wouldn't be able to win. I wasn't that arrogant. That's why I would try to maintain this fixed distance, waiting for the point that had always been prepared.

Still, in the face of technique that was mastered, naïve thoughts of an amateur were easily seen through. When the senpai realized I had no intention of engaging, he haughtily stepped forward and destroyed the equilibrium of our maintained distance.

Whoa. By the time I thought that, I had already been caught and my pivot leg was tripped by a leg that was dispatched from the outside.

The sensation of the floor bursting ran almost simultaneously with the impact against my back.

"…Ouch."

I instinctively let out my voice. What was that speed just now…? That wasn't at the level you could take with ukemi…

Confident in his win, the senpai was already heading back to the starting line.

The audience expressed sighs as well, looking ready to get up and leave.

That's why this prepared point was left nowhere but here.

"Oh boy, what a toughie. Sweat can get you to slip quite a bit, huh?"

I spat out those few words with absolutely no shame.

Everyone looked at me with the expressions, "what's this guy saying?" The senpai, the audience, Yukinoshita, and Yuigahama; they all looked at me. No, even I thought I was doing it too. There was no way an excuse like that would fly.

But as long it did with just one person, then that was good enough.

The judge, Shiroyama, even now hadn't raised the flag or yelled out.

Confirming, I added further.

"I want to check, but does falling over count?"

Shiroyama was quiet. He then looked fixedly at my face and only nodded.

"Both participants, return to the starting line."

That was what he announced. After all, this was an "act".

The audience and of course, the senpai, were outraged. He turned towards Shiroyama and drew closer.

"Hey, no matter how you looked at it, that was a point! Falling, are you kidding me…?"

As he was speaking, the senpai looked at his feet. When he did, the remnants that were left behind when Zaimokuza was dragged away were still there. The

commotion with Hayama and Yukinoshita caused them to forget about wiping it up. That was despite them having done so in every match up until now.

"But that had to be a point!"

The senpai flared up even more. However, a decision couldn't be overturned. No, was it something you could overturn? Shiryoama was pondering on that.

This was something I knew from my half-baked knowledge in sports, but it was rare for a misjudgment to be recognized. It applied to student sports, professional sports, or even international tournaments.

There was then a guaranteed rule common to all of them.

"If you go against the judge, that's a foul."

"Aah?"

The senpai shifted his eyes from Shiroyama to me. They were like those of a beast. Honestly speaking, he was freaking scary. I was about to let out a shivering voice, but I played it off with the shrug of my shoulders.

"That's just how the world is, right? The world's rather darn harsh."

Hearing that, the senpai made a loathsome face. It looked like he was aware of what came out of his mouth after all. It didn't need to be said that this time, he had completely yielded.

"Both participants, move back to the starting line."

When Shiroyama started from the top, the senpai reluctantly went back. It's just that compared to earlier, he was glaring at me with bloodshot eyes.

This was bad. This was utterly bad.

The earlier fraud called an "act" was insurance with a single use. Any more was out of the question. That was because the senpai definitely wouldn't allow it nor would the audience. Furthermore, Shiroyama didn't look like he would either. As proof of that, Shiroyama's face was even more pale than usual. It looked like he was undertaking a high-load of stress.

"Begin."

Shiroyama's voice lacked the strength it had earlier.

If anything, even the voices of the audience were shriveling up. There were even people who stood up and left. Because of that, my panting voice and the senpai's howl easily reached my ears.

That's why my voice that talked to the senpai should easily reach him as well.

"It's a strange thing, isn't it?"

As if he didn't have the experience of someone talking to him in the middle of a match, the senpai looked at me with a puzzled face. The audience should have noticed that I was talking to him. I could feel the attention concentrating on us.

“Senpai. Even though you made it in with a sports recommendation, you sure have the free time to come watch our judo club, huh?”

It was a sudden stop. I definitely was able to confirm that the senpai had stopped his feet.

“…Shut your damn mouth, stop blabbering.”

The fist that grabbed my collars was given even more strength.

But his gaze didn’t perceive me at all in the least.

What it was looking at was my rear and then to the left and to the right. In other words, he was looking at the gallery.

The audience was noisy. It was likely they were suspicious of how we were suddenly in a deadlock. Or those suspicious could have been regarding what the two of us were talking about.

Even so, from the point of view of the senpai, when this conversation was heard and made a commotion, that’s probably how he felt.

That’s why I continued. In a way that could correspond with the senpai’s movements all the while being utterly composed as I observed him.

“Compared to circles in college, they truly practice in earnest, right? Only in high school do you get to play around, I believe.”

“Shut up.”

Offensively, the senpai took a step closer. It was as if he wanted to end the match as soon as possible so he could cut my words off.

I matched his step in with a step out and maintain our fixed distance. I then lightly chuckled.

“Truly, the world really is harsh.”

Just how much of my voice reached the audience?

The amount of people in the gallery was clearly less than before the match started. But this amount was plenty.

Though, if I had to say, it really didn’t matter if any of this was heard by anyone. Butif they held the suspicious that they might’ve heard it, then that was sufficient.

“Really, it’s just like senpai said. Isn’t that why you came back here?”

“……”

The senpai choked on those words. The very words that he spat out himself.

With this, my objective was achieved.

Condemnation in the presence of the public. The fall of his dignity as a senpai and his pride.

It was to make the senpai believe that many students had heard everything. In reality, who heard or who didn't wasn't a problem.

As long we could make the senpai think whether he could show his fate to the world or not, then that was enough.

Whoever won or lost afterwards didn't matter at all.

In reality, the senpai's eyes were darting all over. The only thing he could keep his mind on was what everyone had thought of him. In the first place, there were already signs of that from the start. When I asked him that one time, I could feel it intuitively.

Glorifying the past was evidence that your heart became weak.

Reciting your past achievements was proof that your heart was old.

Wanting to feel relieved by putting someone below you was a sign that you became weak.

It's likely that the senpai had a setback at college. He lost his confidence, his pride, and everything else. That's exactly why he took refuge here.

It's possible he might've not been aware of his actions. He just happened to stop by on a whim and found it to be surprisingly comfortable and then, he grew attached.

But nevertheless, that didn't mean staying here was a good thing. Looking at it from someone who was at the bottom, those who gave from the top were just nuisances.

The world wasn't kind enough to take care of those who ran back with their tails in between their lags.

That's why we brought them down. Evicted them. Ostracized them.

Aah, it's exactly as you said; the world was harsh.

The senpai was biting on his lips. The strength in his arms that grabbed me was no longer there.

It's likely that he wouldn't come by anymore. Those who ran would only continue to do so.

That just had to be confirmed.

To do that, I had to win here.

To lose to an amateur like myself before the eyes of the audience was the best form of humiliation, something that needed to be done to completely destroy his mind.

That's why I smashed the final stake into him.

"You didn't come back here, but ran away here."

It looked like I was able to pull the final trigger.

The senpai made an expression that looked like he was abruptly hit.

I grabbed his sleeve as if inviting him. When I did, he easily gave way. Up until that moment, the strength I held back was definitely used. Did my provocation get to him?

It came.

With no retaliation.

I became aware of the beginning point, the strength point, and the functioning point.

Thanks to being thrown from class and from earlier, I had already understood the form. It looked like being thrown for practice wasn't a mistake after all.

I covered my crude technique with the strength of my arms.

I just needed to somehow carry him up into a position where I could throw him. Just to do that, I would use my arm strength. After that, I wouldn't go against it. All I had to do was leave it to earth's gravity, the laws of inertia, and my fighting instinct.

When I was positioned to shoulder throw him, a tone that sounded like it was spat out yet somehow composed descended from that back.

"Shut your mouth. I'm already aware of all that."

It was then just a drop from there.

Instantly, the flag was raised.

The rounds of applause from the audience could be heard for the winner. The judo dojo reverberated loudly.

"Point! That's it!"

Amongst all the types of voices Shiroyama had up until this moment, this was the most clear and clean.

In contrast, the voice of the individual collapsed on the floor at the end was considerably muddy and pathetic.

"…Ouch."

× × ×

It's been a few days since the passing of the hysterical period right before summer vacation. I was finally going to direct my eyes and nose towards summer vacation with excitement.

It was because of that I was able to attend the Service Club that I didn't really ever want to go, all while humming no less.

Just how many more nights until it was time for summer vacation? Everyday was waiting for the days of everyday.

When I opened the door to the club room, as always, Yukinoshita was reading a book near the window and Yuigahama was collapsed on the table like a lazy dog, fiddling with her cellphone. I wouldn't be seeing this scenery for a while as well.

"Sup."

I greeted them as I usually did and took my seat at the chair that was furthest away, directly opposite of where Yukinoshita was.

When I did, Yukinoshita raised her face from her book.

"Oh, is your injured waist feeling better now?"

"Nope, but I got to skip P.E. because of it."

After I answered, this time Yuigahama raised her face.

"Judo, I think it was? That's admirable of you, keeping the promise and stuff."

"Not really. It was just a lucky break of the sort."

On the day of the judo tournament, at the very end, while conspicuously rubbing the waist that was injured from the ura-nage[20] throw done by the senpai, I was forced to make a promise as the loser.

That promise was to never get involved with the judo club. It looked like my attitude rubbed him the wrong way quite a bit. How I was a bad influence to the club members and how I was a curse to judo and stuff; well, let's just say I was told off in a lot of ways.

Thanks to that, my dream of becoming a judo medalist at the Olympics was stolen from me. Thank goodness; for not having interest in judo that is.

Well, with this waist of mine, I could aim all I wanted, but it wouldn't do me any good. It hurt so much to the point I was blabbering throughout the night, "my hips, it hurts, my hip hurts, ow, it hurts, hurts".

There was still some plain left, but still, since I'll be observing gym for a while, my plusses and minuses canceled out to zero… I got the feeling I definitely had a lot more minuses, but was I really this bad at arithmetic?

"Well, you should be glad things didn't go any further than that. You should thank Shiroyama-kun."

"Right, right. That senpai really wanted to kill you the way he was glaring at you, Hikki."

The two unanimously said to me and it came to mind.

"Mm, Shiroyama, huh?"

Ever since then, I hadn't talked to Potayama, or Shiroyama.

There was the promise I was forced to make by the senpai too, but well, we were probably just showing our consideration to each other. For me to do something like that which I normally wouldn't ever bother, this was quite the

incident. What could I say? I definitely did feel bad for pushing a terrible role on him like that. Since that's how it was going to be, I'd at least avoid causing him any more unpleasant memories by not getting involved with him anymore. It was the greatest kindness I could offer.

"So, how's the judo club been after that?"

Of course, since I was ordered by the Geass to never involve myself ever again, there's no way I could know.

When I asked, Yuigahama, as you'd expect, knew quite a bit from her connections. She was pressing away on her cellphone as if she was mailing someone about that incident.

"Ummm, there hasn't been an increase in new members, but the people who quit came back it looks like."

"Hooh."

Well, if demonstrations like that were enough to get new members, the clubs wouldn't be having so much trouble. Factor in that the ones who had actively participated were Hayama, Zaimokuza and Yukinoshita. Other than that, there wasn't anything else to admire in the organization called the judo club.

"Not everyone came back, but for the people who did, it looks like their reason was because that senpai stopped coming."

Yukinoshita added as she turned the page of her book.

"Ah, right. That's surprising, huh? He was the one who won at the end, so I was totally expecting him to go 'I'm the strongest! Yeaaaaaaaah!'"

"No way, like that'd happen."

Yuigahama's body and hand motions were so stupid that I answered back with a slightly amused voice. When I did, Yukinoshita who found what I said odd slipped a bookmark in her book and closed it.

"I don't think it's likely, but could it be you lost because you knew things would turn out this way?"

"No, I was actually pretty serious about winning, you know…"

In fact, I thought "ah, I totally won" at the end.

"…S-So lame."

Yuigahama-san, you're being a little too honest, okay?

"Is that so… It looked like you were only just trying to provoke him to me. I was sure you were going to hand over the victory and contrive something from there."

So for Yukinoshita-san, she was showing signs of thinking harder than she should've that made her beyond saving. But it's understandable for her to think that way.

“Well, it didn’t matter either way, win or lose. It’s just winning meant a higher chance of the senpai not coming to school anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

Yuigahama’s eyebrows formed an upside “v”, groaning while thinking. But it was nothing complicated.

“Nothing much. ‘You ain’t got a seat!’ If you just got that across, then that was good enough.”

When I said that, Yuigahama’s eyebrows bunched in closer. It looked like it didn’t get across to her

But Yukinoshita made an abrupt smile.

“…I see.”

When she said just those two words as if she understood, she resumed her reading. That suggestive behavior bothered Yuigahama who started to shake Yukinoshita’s body.

“Eh, what is it? What did it mean?”

Getting shook back and forth, Yukinoshita looked extremely irritated, but she continued to read seemingly out of stubbornness. The two’s amusing antics looked like they’d continue for a little longer.

I copied Yukinoshita as well and pulled out a book, opening to the page where my bookmark was placed.

But even as I followed along the words in the book, the content wasn’t getting processed at all, so I gave up and closed the book.

To the senpai, this school was surely “a place I want to return to”. It was nostalgic, comfortable, and pleasant. It was to the point that he wanted to take refuge out of instinct.

Still, the truth that you ran away would further corner you. That’s why you ended up wanting to run away even further, taking along all your stress. It was reality’s infinite loop of escapism.

Just like how you would look at a mirror, as long you didn’t think that society and the gods were watching you, you wouldn’t ever realize that truth.

At the end of the day, the stress you brought forth yourself was something you had to take care of by yourself.

Did he continue running away or did he go back to face it? Just which decision did that senpai choose?

Well, it didn’t matter which. The senpai’s voice at the end of the match still remained in my ears.

I looked outside the window.

In the far horizon where the gigantic columns of clouds drifted. The shouts of the sports clubs with the timbre of the brass band as well as the gently reverberating playful voices of two in the room.

It dawned on me that one day.

That one day, would I ever be able to make such a place? A place where I think I would want to return to.

That’s what I truly thought.

Short Story 4

Even so, **Hikigaya Hachiman's** positive thinking is twisted.

We transitioned into the season where the refreshing winds, rather, the winds that were occasionally cold blew by.

"Chiba Prefecture Problem Consultation Maaails…"

When I announced the title as weakly as the rustling of the autumn winds, Yuigahama clapped her hands. But when Yukinoshita sent a dubious stare, those claps died down.

Yuigahama opened the tray of received mails as if to start things from anew and started off with the first mail.

"Umm, today's first correspondence is from a resident of Chiba, Pen Name: Master Swordsman Shogun-san."

[The deadline of the industry's leader draws near. An infallible method, with haste.]

…This guy was sending way too many mails. It was the same scariness that you'd get when a bot on Twitter was adamant on making conversation with you.

"What's this?"

Yuigahama who read the mail tilted her head and Yukinoshita called my name with a sigh.

"Hikigaya-kun."

"You don't need to tell me, I got it."

It was something like this; now that you made it this far, grandpa was starting to feel like taking care of you now. It's okay, I'll accompany you until the very end… With my mind reaching a state of kindness, or rather, enlightenment, I typed the mail.

[Things like the industry's leader and whatnot, don't be so selfish . Let's just settle for GaGaGa Bunko. Don't worry, it's about the level of Shoggakan, okay? Furthermore, trend has it that GaGaGa writers can't get married with voice actresses.]

"So that's one case done. Yuigahama-san, please read the next one."

Yukinoshita didn't do anything, yet she had a satisfied expression as she urged her to go on. Not finding that strange at all, Yuigahama began reading the next mail.

"Ummm, this is the next correspondence. From a resident of Chiba, Pen Name: Onii-chan's Little Sister-san."

[Lately, I think because it's gotten cold that our cat keeps going inside of our futon and forces me to be his arm pillow. I've yet to do it for onii-chan too! (That just now was high in Komachi points). I can't turn over and the "fusuu" breathing in Komachi's ears bothers me. Is there a good way to handle this?]

After the letter was read, Yukinoshita and Yuigahama looked at me with odd, lukewarm stares.

"So it says, onii-chan."

"There you go, onii-chan."

"Shaddup, don't call me onii-chan."

The one who could call me onii-chan was Komachi and only Komachi. Keep calling me "onii-chan, onii-chan" and Chanko Dining might just start up.

"…By the way, d-do cats really, um, sleep together with you? A-Arm pillow?"

Yukinoshita was somehow embarrassed as she glanced back and forth at me with upturned eyes. That gesture of hers was rather sweet, but the way she was squeezing her fists with all her strength made her not cute at all.

"No, whenever the cat's with me, he just goes straight on top of my stomach."

When I said that, Yuigahama made a mocking smile.

"Isn't he like toootally looking down on you? Kamakura totally thinks HIkki is below him for sure."

"Don't put him on the same level as your dog."

"Cats fundamentally live their lives in isolation, so they don't rank others as they would in a pack. There are cases where they do form packs, but in this situation, it seems closer to a relationship between a parent and child. That's why he might be treating Komachi-san as a mother cat."

Not only was she gallantly analyzing the situation, she was getting super chatty… Both Yuigahama and I shrank back along the way.

"Yukipedia-san sure knows everything, huh…?"

"Could you stop calling me that?"

Yukinoshita glared at me with an indignant face. It looked like she didn't know everything like a certain pedia out there. Well, if she didn't like being called that, then I had better revise it.

"Sorry. Catpedia-san."

"It's fine if you understand."

"You're okay with being called that instead!?"

Seemingly okay with that, in disregard to Yuigahama's surprise, Yukinoshita was nodding her head in content.

Because of Yukinoshita's lecture, I gained a considerable understanding of cats.

"…So basically, in my case, being spoiled by my overflowing, house-husband aura causes him to get on top of my stomach."

Go me. Even the cats recognized my nature as a house-husband. In the future, I feel that I want to live a life like that of a cat's.

But needing to destroy that ambition, Yukinoshita made a sudden, cold smile.

"But getting on top of your stomach could also be said to be the feelings of a parent cat towards its kittens, don't you think?"

"Then he's just being treated like a child."

"…Phew, it looks like my desire-to-be-raised aura was making him do it, eh?"

I was even causing cats to want to bring me up. Amazing.

"Just how positive is your thinking!?"

"If you're going to go that far, that resembles more like a maniac train of thought than positive thinking… Well, it might be better to learn from that as well."

After saying that, Yukinoshita began typing a mail in response.

[Since you get the chance to sleep with a cat, you should at least put up with that much.]

Just get a cat already.

Zzzz

- Disclaimer -

Under no circumstances would you be allowed to take this work for commercial activities or for personal gain. The translator does not and will not condone any activities of such, including but not limited to rent, sell, print, auction. Please support the official release.

- Credits -

Author : Watari Wataru

Illustrator : Ponkan 8

Translator : Excorsism/Spyro
https://kyakka.wordpress.com